

# WHAT ABOUT THE LIBRARY?

**Public consultation for new central libraries often asks all the wrong questions**

BY SARAH GELBARD



A new, or at least renewed, central public library has been on the table since I first moved to Ottawa in 2001.

I suspect the conversation started a week after the current Main Branch opened in 1973, finally giving the city the new library it had been lusting after for decades.

The earliest discussions I recall focused around renovating, modernizing, and expanding the existing building. In 2013, the Ottawa Public Library hired Ajon Moriyama Architect Inc. to prepare a feasibility report with three alternative scenarios: renewal, renovation, and redevelopment. The report's suggestions and board's recommendations were scrapped in the 2014 election when incumbent Mayor Jim Watson made the campaign promise for the construction of a new central library.

The public consultation in Ottawa has focused our attention on great examples of new central libraries in Montréal, Halifax, and several cities in Europe. Telling of the City's pre-conceived vision of what a new library looks like, the recently released shortlist of architecture teams is drawn directly from this limited, outward-looking set of models. Missing from the discussion are examples of great renovation and modernization projects like the Toronto Reference Library or Hamilton Public Library. Perhaps more importantly, the process is lacking space for us to collectively reflect upon and imagine not just what a library looks like, but what it means.

We are seeing a resurgence of new mega-central libraries, particularly in North America. Like Ottawa, many cities built new central libraries between the 1950s and 1970s, as part of major postwar investments in civic infrastructure. Those libraries were largely built to replace and modernize those built in the public library boom of the 1890s through 1920s. Perhaps, in a strange way, the "end of the book" excitement and the "death of the library" narratives of the



late 1990s and early 2000s refocused our attention on the importance of public libraries as one of the few truly public spaces in our cities. Similarly, with a bit of distance, perhaps we see the limitations of the Internet, virtual space, and distributed networks. We have returned our attention to the value of common centralized meeting spaces.

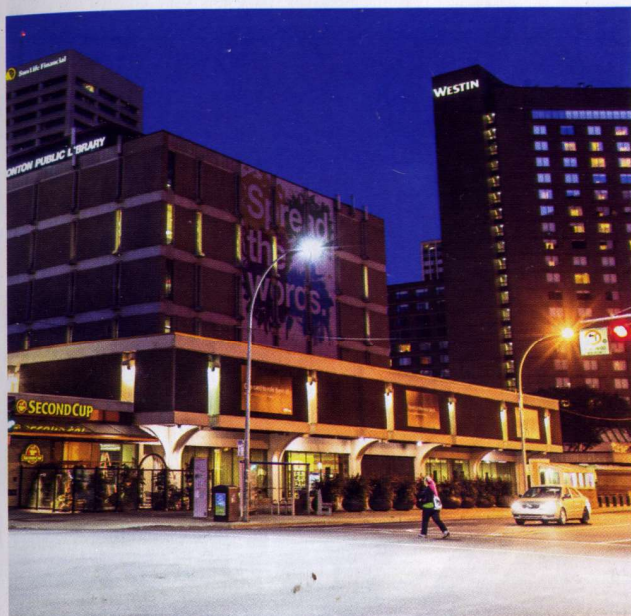
Libraries are an interesting case study in our simultaneous belief in and fear of the potential of technology to change the way we do things. Architecture has long been a way for us to try to capture that potential and excitement, while also working to stabilize the unknown consequences. Our predictions of future needs are frequently misdirected. Architecture is slow. City projects are slow. It seems that all these new future-looking libraries are doomed to always be a little behind the times. Perhaps libraries are more timeless than we give them credit for.

In our rush to imagine new libraries, what are we forgetting about the libraries of our past? As Ottawa joins other cities in building new landmark architecture, what opportunities is it overlooking to connect us with the fond memories we have, not just of the existing Main Branch, but with our memories of the libraries from other cities and from different times in our lives? As a civic community building project, would not the library be an ideal space to collect our stories? Would not these stories be the ideal collection upon which to build or renew a library?

With this in mind, my colleagues Rebecca Clare Dolgoy and Amanda Montague and I launched "But what about the library?" — an ongoing project that aims to prompt memories and collect stories about libraries. We hope to move beyond the public consultation narratives that privilege both a future orientation and particular architectural styles of libraries. It is through these reflections that we come to understand more fully the connections between memories and places. Memories are an im-

portant part of how we construct our present experiences of place, shaping what we want from our spaces, and what we need from them as markers of continuity at times of change.

Through collecting these stories, we have come to recognize the folly of thinking of the libraries of the future as distinct from the libraries of the past. While technologies and architectural trends might mediate our use and sense of space, they fail to account for the deeper underlying meaning of libraries themselves. The underpinning characteristic of the memories we have collected is the profound sense of continuity and belonging that libraries enable. When imagining new or renewed libraries, cities might benefit from paying closer attention to the social and material qualities that will continue to foster libraries as spaces for gathering, belonging, discovery, sharing, access, reflection, and growth. †



## Centennial Library (Now Stanley A. Milner Library)

Edmonton Alberta, Winter 1995

REBECCA CLARE DOLGOY

It was light on the ground floor: the fluorescence was visible from outside because dusk comes early to Edmonton in winter. Once inside, I was enveloped by the smell of books and Brutalist building material. To the left was the children's section, though by the time I started visiting what was then called the Centennial Library, I had already outgrown it. The bathrooms were to the right, and the circulation desk sat in the middle. The ground floor was occupied by metal shelves lined with scruffy-looking paperbacks. But, for me, the library experience began on the escalator. The darkness thickened the higher you went. Upstairs, the reference section embodied the sacred responsibility of being able to know.

On that day, I found a seat at the microfiche machine; it was somehow even darker near the wall where the machine was perched upon a table. I can't recall the na-

ture of the project — though I am certain it involved old copies of the *Edmonton Journal* — but I do remember the purple-grey light of the machine and the weight of the lever that moved the focus around the pages. I felt a simultaneous freedom to explore and rooted connectedness. There were eye prints on the microfiches and fingerprints on the book pages. I never knew who had left the marks, but I did sense that we were part of the same civic community — one that stretched out around me and that reached backwards and forwards in time.

Shortly before dinner, I left the darkness of the upstairs, quickly passed through the wash of the unflattering fluorescents on the ground floor, and re-entered the city street outside. By then, the sky was a dark deep purple. The stairs were clear of snow. The rough stones on the building's façades glistened a bit in the orange street light. I either crossed Churchill Square to catch the number 12 bus or turned the corner to look for my mother's wood-paneled burgundy station wagon. My mind was full of glimpses into the past of the place where I lived, and though I can't remember the details, I do remember that whatever mundane story I had discovered became monumental in my imagination.

## Morriset Library

Ottawa Ontario, Fall 2012

AMANDA MONTAGUE

In the year between my Master's degree and my PhD I took some time off, not to do anything particularly exciting (I mostly just worked retail), but as a transitional time in between what I had just finished and what I was about to embark on. I was tired from all of the stress of MA thesis writing, so I welcomed the year off, and by the time I started my PhD in Ottawa I had the naïve optimism of someone who had forgotten just how hard the previous degree was, and who didn't fully realize just how much harder the next one was going to be.

When I moved to Ottawa to begin my PhD, I felt a bit uncertain about returning to grad school. It hadn't been that long since I had finished my MA, but one tends to forget a lot in that time, or at least I had forgotten a lot. Plus, being in an unfamiliar city away from my friends and family made it all the more difficult. But all of this changed when I entered Morisette Library for the first time — not because there was anything particularly

beautiful or comforting about it, but because I was instantly transported back to the sense of familiarity, and sense of purpose I had had while doing my previous two degrees.

I distinctly remember that moment of disembarking from the elevator, finding myself in a forest of stacks, smelling the books, and feeling comforted — excited, even — to be back. It was the familiarity of the place that resonated with me: the same smells, the same fluorescent overhead lighting, the same arrangement of study carrels, the same limits on food and beverages, the same books even, and the same system of organizing them.

There have been many great moments, many mediocre moments, and many difficult moments spent in Morisette Library in the time since that first trip, on the first day of my PhD, and that high-gloss experience of returning to the university library for the first time has certainly worn away. But thinking back to that one moment is still anchoring. ↑

photos courtesy (previous page) Sarah Gelbard;  
(top left) IQRemix; (right) Douglas Scott

