

## IN THE NEWS

### **Libraries evolve to satisfy needs of diverse clientele**

*Leanne Dohy. Calgary Herald. Calgary, Alta.: Sep 25, 2005. pg. A.11*

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In an information society, public libraries play a critical role in allowing equal access to that information. Meeting that need has required an evolution in both operations and attitudes -- with changes that are visible in Calgary's public libraries.

Clusters of computers offer Internet access. DVDs and CDs fill aisles of their own. Book clubs gather in bright, central meeting rooms, and children sprawl in pillow-filled reading pits. "The changes have been massive," says Gerry Meek, director of the Calgary Public Library. "Libraries have become really dynamic destinations. They're emerging as the community living room, serving a very diverse society."

Spaces are designed to be comfortable and inviting, and to encourage conversation. Quiet study spaces still exist, but they're set off. Children are not only tolerated, but offered bright, kid-durable spaces of their own. The needs of disabled clients are met through assistive devices and specialized materials, seniors can find stacks of large-print books, and there are growing collections in a number of different languages.

David Edmunds, a Calgary architect whose firm Graham Edmunds Cartier has recently designed several public libraries in the United States and Canada, says reports of the impending demise of libraries weren't just premature -- they were wrong. The demand for library services has continued to grow. The new libraries being built, though, have a different face than those built in the past. "If you look at the New York public library, it's designed to look like a courthouse, to be formidable," Edmunds says. "With the libraries being designed across North America now, there's focus on making very accessible, inviting public buildings."

The new Crowfoot public library reflects that ideal, Meek says. "It's a beautiful building, with lots of parking and inviting spaces," he says. "It's meant to accommodate a lot of uses."

The central library downtown -- built to serve a population of around 400,000 people -- is straining to meet the demands of a city more than twice that size. It outgrew its capacity more than 25 years ago, can't meet current standards for accessibility and cannot structurally maintain the book loads on all floors. The discussions necessary to rebuild the aging building have begun, with \$40 million recently earmarked by city council for its construction. Details of the project are expected to be revealed later this year, although construction won't likely begin for several years.

"In 2012, the Calgary Public Library will celebrate its 100th year of service," Meek said. "We'd like to move towards that date, for a really special celebration."