

Calgary's new Central Library  
**IN THE NEWS**

**Libraries help build vibrant, creative city**

Gerry Meek, *Calgary Herald*, March 24, 2008, pg. A9

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I'd like to comment on the Herald's editorials of this past week and add to the discussion regarding the blow the closure of the McNally Robinson bookstore on Stephen Avenue will be to downtown vibrancy and the literary community. ("Sad chapter for Calgary," March 16; "It's time to turn a new page after favourite bookstores close," March 20.)

First, let me say I agree. It will be a blow. Any time we lose welcoming and accessible places that provide an opportunity for the exchange of creative ideas, conversation and dialogue, literacy and learning, celebration and enjoyment, we lose a little of what is, in essence, the soul of our city -- a little of what we so highly value in our democratic society yet often take for granted. It's one of the many reasons public libraries are so important to our communities. These kinds of welcoming places, providing shared and diverse experiences, are at the very heart of what public libraries are all about.

Libraries share many goals with bookstores. We are complementary. We are both needed. We are different, though, in how we are inherently anchored to the community, and the contributions we make to the economic activity and resiliency of our city and our quality of life. I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that our Central Library already plays a pivotal role in the vibrancy of the downtown and the literary community. Maybe it's time to turn the page and talk about what our new landmark Central Library, currently in the planning stages, will contribute to Calgary.

As an iconic building rich in features, with plenty of wow factors and generous spaces (parking, too), it will not only raise the bar for the delivery of 21st-century library services, it will be a major catalyst for downtown urbanization and revitalization of the Rivers District and one of Calgary's most important economic and social infrastructure investments.

The new library, to be built on the current site at Macleod Trail and 7th Avenue S.E., will stand not only as a symbol of architectural and environmental achievement, but as a major attraction, cultural venue and economic engine in its own right. It will be a source of civic pride, a valued destination. It will generate jobs and spending, boost cultural activity, and contribute to the vitality of the downtown and the creation of a livable, caring and thriving centre.

Is all this possible? You bet. The recent experiences of cities like Montreal, Seattle and Salt Lake City, whose civic leaders viewed investing in landmark libraries as an investment in the very soul of their cities' futures, are reaping exponential, sustainable returns. And we will too, to the benefit of all Calgarians. Libraries are needed today more than ever. They provide necessary space for community interaction, universal access to ideas and information, and serve as a dynamic community commons where people and ideas come together to build a stronger, more vibrant city.

More and more, economic development success strategies involve people, technology and growing an infrastructure for economic activity built on ideas, knowledge, experience and quality of life. Libraries contribute the human, social, institutional and physical resources that make this possible, through early literacy and school readiness programs that provide long-term benefits, through workforce development, technology skills and career support and through support services and online resources for small businesses.

Can a new Central Library contribute to a thriving, energized downtown and a brighter future for all Calgarians? Absolutely. But, we also need new branch libraries, and thanks to city council, funds for three more branch libraries are already earmarked.

Great cities are defined by their great public spaces, and without question, Calgary Public Library is the most public of all public places, accessed and utilized more than 32 million times last year -- more than all other recreation, culture and sports facilities combined. Libraries are the symbol of a city's regard for its people, a statement about the role and importance of inclusion, information and ideas in the mainstream life of flourishing cities. Our public libraries bring people together to create community and enjoy enriching life experiences. We are a place of firsts for beginning readers and aspiring authors. We are a venue where creative writers workshop their ideas, and all kinds of people come to experience book discussions, topical panels, research our vast collections, seek advice from our expert staff and choose great reads.

What makes bookstores successful is a good reading public. I think we'll take some credit for that, because what makes a good reading public is a great public library. By the way, we do have lots and lots of books.