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Seattle Meeting Attracts the World

Librarians look at future of central libraries, focus on the showpiece

The question of what makes a new central library great drew over 340 participants to Seattle for “Shattering Stereotypes,” held April 27–29. It was jointly sponsored by the Seattle Public Library (SPL)—whose year-old central library was a major draw—and the Public Libraries International Network (PLIN), which incorporates members from the now defunct Bertelsmann Foundation International Library Network.

Rem Koolhaas (pictured at right), architect of SPL’s new building, eschewed the mantle of a “star architect, not interested in listening to my clients.” He described the highly collaborative process that created the structure: understanding the programmatic elements, translating them into a diagram (which eventually morphed into a building), and sharing the plans with public and staff.

Many sessions focused on SPL’s experience, from selecting an architect to planning an opening to determining the building’s economic impact (see *Front Desk*, p. 15).

Do it yourself

The conference, which was attended largely by library directors with major capital projects on the horizon, was notably pragmatic. Self-service was a hot topic, and Seattle’s experience with RFID tagging faced close scrutiny, especially the sorting system that handles all SPL facilities (and runs six days a week, 24 hours-a-day for three of them). Likewise, the National Library



Board of Singapore’s sessions on its “DIY” (Do It Yourself) libraries—which turn nearly all library tasks except reshelving over to patrons—drew large crowds, as did a program on the self-service experiences of Danish and Dutch libraries.

PLIN’s sponsorship gave the conference an international edge missing from other North American gatherings. Audiences were fascinated by the Helsinki City Library’s new branch, a nearly bookless library focused on technology and multimedia; Denmark’s catalogs, which feature the sort of “Amazon-like” functionalities (“other readers have also borrowed”) that U.S. librarians only dream of; and the Netherlands’ experience with Medialab’s Aquabrowser, visualization software for catalogs used by all public libraries there.

Several attendees seemed startled to discover that U.S. public libraries weren’t necessarily the global leaders in innovation and that other libraries had years of experience with technologies and services new to North America.—**Brian Kenney**

clear mandate to take this city forward,” Murphy said. He barely won a three-way election over write-in candidate Councilwoman Donna Frye.

Deputy Mayor Michael Zucchet, who will be interim mayor, is himself under federal indictment on charges of receiving bribes. The city council could appoint a replacement or hold a special election. Frye said she’d run. Both she and the other candidate, Ron Roberts, had said they’d hold off on the downtown library plan.

As for that project, San Diego *Union-Tribune* publisher David C. Copley has pledged \$2 million toward the \$50 million private fundraising goal. However, \$33 million of that figure is due by July, with only \$3 million pledged. Before Murphy’s resignation, “we had a 60 percent chance to make this happen,” fundraising drive leader Mel Katz told the *Union-Tribune*. “Now we have a 50 percent chance.” Library spokesman Arrian Collins said, “We remain optimistic.”—**Norman Oder**

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