

# Libraries create futures: building on cultural heritage

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# IFLA Congress 2009

**T**he Western Cape Provincial Library Service was in the fortunate position to be able to send two delegates to this year's annual IFLA Congress, hosted in Milan, Italy. We share their experiences.

NEVILLE ADONIS

**Assistant Director: Support Services**

Milan was chosen to host the 75th IFLA Annual Conference as this city has a rich cultural heritage that blended in perfectly with the theme of this year's World Library Information Congress. The outgoing IFLA (International Federal Library Association) President, Claudia Lux, said in her welcoming address: 'By influencing the agendas of our communities, regions, institutions, companies, governments, and the international bodies that deal with the world we live in, we librarians and information workers are creating not only our future, but a better world. Whatever the economic, social or political conditions, our profession must take an active role in defining and delivering equitable access to the resources that provide information for all, lead us to knowledge, and improve the quality of community and individual lives.'

From the medieval and renaissance era to today, libraries have stood the test of time. Thanks to libraries, civilisations have gathered and stored evidence of their artistic, literary, musical and cultural heritage. Libraries preserve the roots of human knowledge. However, the transmission of knowledge today has changed radically. At the IFLA Congress this change was evident in the topics with the chosen, underlying theme of cultural heritage.

The topics included: Knowledge management; Libraries serving persons with disabilities; School libraries and resource centres; Information technology; National libraries; Audiovisual and multimedia; Women, information and libraries; Government information and official publications; Environmental sustainability and libraries; Corporate partners; Rare books and manuscripts; Preservation and conservation; Library and research services; Library services to multicultural populations;

Information literacy; Government libraries; Libraries for children and young adults and Copyright and other Legal matters (to name a few).

It was impossible to attend all the presentations and workshops as presentations ran simultaneously at times and my colleague, Steven Andries and I needed to choose the presentations that were of interest to us and the Library Service carefully. We chose different sessions, but both of us could not resist attending the session on public and metropolitan libraries which, in my opinion was one of the most interesting.

## Public libraries and metropolitan libraries

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*Speakers: Vicky McDonald (State Library of Queensland, Brisbane) and Veronda Pitchford (Urban Libraries Council, Chicago)*

The speakers predicted that approximately 48% of library staff managers are going to retire before long. On the other hand, young professionals are not interested in managing libraries. For the State Library in Queensland library partnerships and funding are key issues for its survival in a changing information environment. In order to incorporate any change, they have made their library more user-friendly, such as changing their signage so that the library could be more visible. They invested in developing online collections. Their users use the Internet to access their library collections. E-loans are very important and have increased. Website visits as well as online resources usage have increased. The Queensland Public Library (a metropolitan library) focuses on job seekers, persons with disabilities, older adults, basic information that appeals to its users, (such as how to get a driver's licence and how to find a job), computer literacy and health literacy through a health link. They offer activities such as exercise classes and nutritional information for users, youth literacy classes (500 of their employees are teenagers), family literacy classes (they have an Adult

Learner Centre) and also focus on financial literacy (for instance basic information on how to open a bank account). One of their major successes is the establishment of a Teen Library for teenagers only.

## Teen Library (13-19 years)

The Teen Library is a separate extension to the existing library and focuses on life skills programmes, homework, teenage helpers to assist teenagers, social workers, and youth councillors. There are no books in the Teen Library but they have approximately 38 computers and various audiovisual materials. The Teen Library is a unique idea and one of their most successful projects. It attracts teenagers which would have been lost users to the library.

## Vancouver Public Library

The Vancouver Public Library has 112 databases for their users' explicit use. They predict that audiovisual material will disappear within 5-10 years. There is a definite decline in print circulation in the Vancouver Library. Predictions were made that printed material will remain the dominant medium only until 2020 in their library. However, this is not applicable in other libraries and countries as each country has its own socio-economic conditions. Merging and integration for the public libraries are key focuses. Service profiles of branches reflect different needs of the local communities. This means that different communities have different socio-economic information needs and the Vancouver Public Library repositioned their branch libraries to accommodate these needs. The library recommended that library buildings be modern and flexible. Physical collections of libraries should be smaller, but more up-to-date, there should be reading and study facilities, longer opening hours, and integration of printed and digital library services and resources. They also recommend that the public library be combined with the school library. Public libraries and cultural houses should merge.

## Knowledge management, library and research services

*Speaker: Dr Frank Cervone (Vice Chancellor, Information Services, Purdue University) on social computing tools in the public library.*

Dr Cervone recommended that public libraries should engage in the community using virtual reference service sharing online tools such as Facebook for teenagers in public libraries, Bloggers, Twitter, Online chats, SMS message sharing, Myspace.com, Teachertube, Youtube, Flickr, Footnote, et cetera. A case study in Illinois indicated that 35% of public libraries have no web presence while 65% do. However, Dr Cervone indicated that only 147 out of 699 public libraries in Illinois used the social tools as indicated above. It became clear that social computing tools are not used much in public libraries yet.

## School libraries and resource centres

*Speaker: Dr Ekaterina Genieva (All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature, Moscow)*

'Museums, cultural houses and libraries enhance each other: Preserve our heritage and promote it through school or public libraries - build information literacy. Use the public library to promote museums, archives, languages, culture and sport. "Think out of the box" to preserve our cultural heritage. The role of the public library has been limited in the preservation of cultural heritage.'

Qui Ching told of a case study that was conducted on how libraries could enrich cultural life in rural China, where not many people visit their local libraries. Their Department of Culture then launched a project which included a reading room, projector, digital camera, TV sets and Internet access to the libraries. The local people could then watch television, surf the Internet and use the reading room. The membership increased dramatically in the rural communities. There was no cinema in the village, so the public library provided this.

## Exhibitions

The exhibitions were excellent. In one exhibition a robot was used to carry shelves and books from one place to another. It was also exciting to see a large



banner of the new Central Library of Cape Town on display. Ms Christel Lubbe, who also attended the Congress, was marketing this library.

## Conclusion

The key focus of the 2009 IFLA Congress was on change, the role of the public library to preserve cultural heritage, and the partnerships of the public library with cultural institutions such as museums, archives and cultural houses. However, for me there were three aspects that stood out. They were the introduction of a Teen Library, recommendations for librarians to 'think out of the box' and that librarians should not be afraid to reposition the library to accommodate the changing information needs of users. This was the framework that was set for librarians on an international level. It was a great experience to attend a congress on an international level and to liaise with librarians from all over the world. The standard was high and my expectations were met in the excellent quality and relevance of the presentations.

STEVEN ANDRIES

Assistant Director: Boland Control Area

With great anticipation I left Cape Town International Airport on Saturday 22 August with my my colleague Neville Adonis on our way to attend the IFLA Conference in Milan, Italy. Understandably I was a little nervous, as it was my first overseas visit.

Our flight took 13 hours and was without incident. We arrived at Heathrow Airport, London, in the early hours of Sunday morning and waited until the afternoon for the connecting flight to Milan.

After flying over the Alps and seeing the snow on the mountains we were surprised to be hit by temperatures of 40 degrees plus at Malpensa Airport. Luckily, after we cleared customs our transport was ready and we were on our way to the hotel. Despite the heat we risked the streets of Milan in search of a supermarket. We got totally lost and after establishing that the Italians cannot or do not want to speak English we had to rely on ourselves to find our way back to the hotel, which took us more than two hours.

On Monday morning, armed with a road map and detailed directions from the receptionist at the hotel, we took to the streets again in search of the conference centre. That proved to be no problem as we met other delegates on our way and just followed the stream of people.

We went to the registration desk, confident in the knowledge that our registration was confirmed by e-mail. Another setback! We were told that our registration was not paid in full and we had to go to the next counter to settle our accounts. After an explanation of how the shortfall occurred we realised that we had to pay the outstanding amount. I presented my credit card (travel wallet card) and was shocked to hear that the card was not working. After the transaction was declined for the third time I was forced to ask Neville to cover my outstanding amount. At last all was sorted out, we were registered and issued with bright orange bags and some promotional material and we could attend the sessions.

It was a great disappointment to have missed the opening ceremony. Nevertheless, attending the congress was a great experience.

The different papers addressed a wide spectrum of issues within the framework of the theme of the congress. The papers were very informative and thought-provoking. There were many interesting papers and sometimes we had to miss out on some of them due to parallel sessions.

A definite highlight was the inauguration of the new IFLA president, Ellen Tise, university librarian at Stellenbosch University. She will be in the driving seat of IFLA for the next two years. To be the IFLA president is the highest position for any library and information professional and having a South African in this role is a great honour for South Africa. Her theme for her presidential reign, *Libraries driving access to knowledge* is a very challenging one indeed and focuses specifically on user orientation, advocacy, libraries as place, the role of libraries in social inclusion and the need for strong partnerships. The significance of her appointment is that it will focus international attention on the library and information sector in South Africa and Africa as a whole. In her acceptance speech she made the statement that libraries and librarians are not only driving access to knowledge, but that they are also creators of knowledge, making them part of the knowledge building process. The South African Consulate in Milan arranged a function in Ellen's honour to celebrate her appointment and invited all the South African delegates.

In the session on *Creativity and Innovation* papers on the Queens Public Library (New York) and the Stockholm Public Library stood out.

#### *Queens Public Library (New York City)*

The speaker emphasised the importance of partnerships between the private sector, government and NGOs. The central library (with 61 community libraries) serves a diverse community and has the highest circulation in the United States of America. Every neighborhood has a branch within walking distance of users. The Queens Library Service has a diverse staff to serve its diverse communities. The library is deeply involved in literacy projects, for example, family and health literacy. Other services include youth enrichment, life skills programmes and teen libraries.

To accommodate the influx of children to the community libraries the idea of the teen library was introduced. (See discussion above.)

#### *Stockholm Public Library (Sweden)*

This service consists of the central library with 39 branches, including children's and mobile libraries, libraries in hospitals and prisons, an international library and a library on the web.

The speaker referred to the banner at the entrance of the Bessie Head Library in Pietermaritzburg which reads *Look, don't you see. We are the people who have the strength to change the world.* The speaker saw this as an attempt to advocate sustainable knowledge. He emphasised three issues regarding a library service:



- » *Competencies:* This includes avoiding homogenous libraries and embracing diversity (thinking out of the box), forming groups to enhance each other's competencies (librarians working with non-librarians) and customer understanding.
- » *Business intelligence:* asking questions, developing a strategy and displaying the courage to try, regardless of the result.
- » *Responsibility:* To empower yourself and colleagues, to follow-up to certify results, to make the most of taxpayer's money.

The speaker's endnote, *The library makes the city grow if the library grows with the city*, gave an indication of a public library service working together with the community to meet changes and challenges.

The session on *Ethics in the library* proved to be very interesting and thought-provoking. The first speaker addressed the issue of filtration in Russian libraries. The following questions were raised:

- » Is Internet filtration good or bad?
- » Who makes the decision to limit access?
- » Who monitors Internet filtration?
- » Who determines access restrictions?

Methods used to filter Internet access include rules to Internet usage, filtering programmes, visual control and verbal warnings.

In Russia (and I presume in many other countries), restrictions apply to porn sites, sites that advocate violence, race feuds, et cetera. When filtering the Internet, librarians should keep users informed about the filtered sites. Librarians should also be able to override filters and to monitor access for children.

The second speaker addressed the issue of libraries and government agencies. The concern was the disclosure of patron information to government agencies, for example, patron records, user records, circulation records, computer usage records. Questions raised were the users' right to privacy, the rights of librarians and what is done to safeguard user information privacy. This discussion underlined the fact that librarians need to know about the laws governing the disclosure of personal information.

The session on *Services to inmates and public libraries* also provided food for thought. Public library involvement in prisons is virtually non-existent in the Western Cape, and the rest of South Africa for that matter. Currently the Western Cape Provincial Library Service renders a service to prison libraries in terms of library material, and a few training courses to correctional service staff.

In some countries like Spain, France and the United States of America library services to inmates are regarded as a necessity. In Spain inmates have access to Integrated Communication Technology (ICTs) and blogs, and in France reading promotion and literacy programmes are some of the services delivered to inmates. In the USA most state prisons implement the programme *Breaking barriers with books* whereby incarcerated fathers are connected with their children. Librarians and educational staff manage this programme.

To break the monotony of the sessions I went to see the RAILS Automated Search and Retrieval System (ASRS) at the University of Brescia. RAILS™ ASRS is the latest robot technology. The system gives a double capacity of density storage compared with any other existing high-density storage system. It can generate massive savings to libraries, archives and documentary centres both in terms of investment and in terms of reduced management costs. In my opinion this system is more suitable to an academic library as it does not allow for browsing.

I'm not sure whether it was a question of saving the best for last, but on the last day the session on *The proactive librarian - the how and the why*

attracted a full house. The speaker, Dr Songa Dakshinahurti, suggested that the decline in statistics and the continuing development in ICT may force librarians to rethink service provision, for example:

- » become user centered rather than service centered;
- » become consultants rather than service providers;
- » apply means to assess users' needs (can users find, interpret and apply information?);
- » assess their own capabilities (such as staff, resources and partnerships);
- » continuously evaluate user needs;
- » make themselves and their services relevant to users;
- » win support from partners;
- » demonstrate a willingness to change;
- » examine capabilities realistically;
- » raise awareness to management about what libraries and librarians do;
- » link ICT and users;
- » create a pro-active link (linking the past, present and future).

The session on *Environmental sustainability and libraries* is also worth mentioning. It was presented by a Special Interest Group on Environmental Sustainability. The topic related directly to UNESCO's Millennium Development Goal 7. The group addressed issues like development of the green library, user training in protecting the environment, education, public awareness programmes, and environmental excursions. The group also works closely with the international organisation *Libraries without borders* and organises talks, discussions and seminars on environmental sustainability and libraries. Environmental sustainability is of great importance, not only to Africa, but also globally, yet there is no representation by Africa in this group.

The exhibitions were very interesting and it felt good to see that the National Library of South Africa and the City of Cape Town also participated. This definitely is a good platform to promote one's organisation globally.

South Africa is a developing country with both first and third world conditions and after the conference I realised that, although we pride ourselves on providing a good service to our communities, in comparison with other countries we still have a long way to go.

*Note: The next IFLA Conference will be held in Goteborg in Sweden in 2010 and in Puerto Rico in 2011. The newly appointed IFLA President is Ellen Tise from South Africa, currently the university librarian of Stellenbosch University.* ✚

