

Project Summary.

**OPEN
CITY**
Projects

PARKDALE LIBRARY

Photo: Michi McCloskey





Photo: Wendy Gold

“Here at Parkdale, we have an open door policy. We try to balance the interest of groups as best we can.”

— *Miranda, Branch Manager*

From the exterior, Parkdale Library looks more like an old-fashioned schoolhouse than a core public space in a cosmopolitan city. Set back from the street, the low-rise brick building might go unnoticed by people passing by if there weren't a line up outside every morning. Inside, the library is a dynamic place buzzing with chatter and activity. Children play games at computer terminals and adults use the same computers as their home office. Teens study and work with homework tutors. Moms sit together and chat, sometimes all day, while waiting for their kids to finish school. Newcomers to Canada gather at the conversation circle to practice their English and share stories about life in the neighbourhood. Seniors read the newspaper and nap at tables. There is an open door policy and everything goes, within reason. This is not your typical library.

Located west of downtown Toronto on Queen Street, the library is easy to reach by streetcar, bike and walking. Visitors reflect the diversity of the neighbourhood in terms of income and culture. The majority of people originally come from Eastern Europe, South and Southeast Asia, Southern Europe and the Caribbean.¹ Over the years, the staff has worked with visitors to understand the needs of this diverse and evolving community.

Skylights in the main hall and colourful murals around the room create a surprisingly bright and welcoming environment. The lighting and open layout make it easy to see people, even when they are in the book stacks at the periphery of the room. An informal, intimate setting makes the entire library feel as inviting as the children's section. The furniture is simple and well-used which adds to familiarity of the place. Young kids come and go freely, with a clear sense of comfort and security, as if the library were an extension of their home.

¹ Census, 1996



Photos: Wendy Gold, Michi McCloskey

A range of local languages are spoken, and reflected in the space, making visitors feel like they belong. Signage, services and library materials reflect the range of prominent languages in the community and celebrate culture. Periodicals and books in Hindi, Mandarin, Tamil and Tibetan are selected based on the neighbourhood's demographics.

The staff also play a key role in making the library a friendly place. They are generally encouraging and inclusive. Most speak multiple languages and are from different cultural backgrounds themselves.

A variety of seating and programs bring people together and facilitate interaction. There are long communal tables, and smaller ones, as well as separate study rooms. Although there is seating for nearly 100, when the library is busy people need to share tables which can create unexpected connections. There is a range of programs available from youth tutoring and cultural programs to literacy support and English as a second language offered through a partnership with government settlement workers. Visitors drive programming ideas and the staff generally allow residents to adapt the space, and the rules, to suit the needs of their diverse community. They understand that many people come to the library to congregate as much as to use the library materials. Over time, people recognize each other and build relationships. Staff and visitors become one community through shared experiences and transform the space.

“People come here to access whatever they need. There’s a community center across the street but they come here most of the time. This is everything together in one spot.”

— Deepak, Settlement Program Director

TAKEAWAYS

When combined, the following design elements can help inform Design for Diversity:

Access

Provide safe entry to the space

The library is easy to reach by streetcar, bike and walking. The brightly lit, open layout creates a safe environment, making it easy to see people in the space.

Broad Appeal

Ensure broad appeal so people feel comfortable and enjoy using the space.

Simple services, such as air conditioning, heat in the winter and free wireless internet, attract people.

The intimate scale makes the entire library feel as comfortable as the children's section. Plenty of seating gives everyone a place to spend time.

Welcome

Create an inclusive experience so people feel that they belong

The open door policy signals tolerance. Friendly staff, who speak multiple languages and come from different cultures, make visitors feel welcome. Signage, services and library materials are available in different languages.

Interaction

Promote understanding between people through connection

Programming and communal seating bring people together.

Participation

Enable people to take agency and feel a sense of ownership of the place

Rules have been adapted to meet the needs of this culturally diverse community. People are allowed to sleep on tables, talk and spend the day in the space.

About Us.

Founded in 2006, **OpenCity** is a creative lab that explores the design of cities. We've spent more than a decade learning about what motivates people from different cultures to spend time in public spaces and connect with others. Our goal is to inspire city-builders and provide them with tools to Design for Diversity.