

Innovation Embedded: The Launch of Qatar National Library

Abstract

The first new national library of the 21st century was opened in Qatar on April 16th 2018. Built from the ground up with innovation in mind, Qatar National Library (QNL) functions as a national, research and public library all in one. This presentation will showcase the state-of-the-art library building designed by Rem Koolhaas and discuss what library innovation looks like on a grand scale. It will also look at what it means to open a new library service in a country with big ambitions but with little history of lending collections, or services, or public librarianship. What sort of leadership is needed to bring a library model to the people of Qatar? And how does a new library complement Qatar's Vision 2030 strategy and support the Sustainable Development Goals?

1. Intro

- Who am I?
 - IFLA
 - Policy wonk to practitioner – 15 years after last working in a library
 - Why move to Qatar?
 - QNL's mission
 - Role in country's vision
 - What will this presentation do?
 - Showcase the building – obviously
 - But try to focus on the why, and the building's mission
 - Explain why innovation is embedded in the library's very heart
- Before I begin, I trust that everyone is familiar with the demographics of Qatar?
 - 2.7 million residents
 - Interestingly, only around 330,000 Qatari nationals
 - Which leaves room for nearly 2.4 million ex-pats
 - 75% of whom are men
 - In terms of information, I find it a 'leap frog' country – people seem to have completely bypassed that frustrating period of IT development where we preserved through dial-up, and emerged straight into the digital, always-on, wi-fi-ed handheld present. In information terms, mobile is king.
- In this context, I want to talk about the library. QNL is the product of an idea had by Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Chairperson of the Qatar Foundation which is a major player in the educational and cultural sphere of the country
 - HH dreamed of a new library as a transformative agent for new discovery within Qatar
 - Now, the theme of our conference is innovation – and I consider Sheikha Moza's dream as innovation at the most fundamental level: effectively, what

has been done in Qatar is to introduce a new library service where before none existed.

- Plus the QNL story is about a very contemporary, yet almost counter-intuitive innovation - an investment in a physical library when the digital world was gaining in importance, and when in many countries library funding has been severely cut
- Project started in 2012, officially opened April 16, 2017, just last month
 - Spent a year of my life on it
- Prior to the opening, as of royal decree, QNL was officially declared the country's national library in March this year
- Inside, it is very visibly partly a traditional library – by design
 - One million books, mostly in English and Arabic
 - Meeting and study spaces, restaurant and cafeteria
 - Performance spaces and learning workshops
 - A heritage library, built to represent an archeological dig, built into the very foundations of the main library building
 - And cutting-edge technology is wired into everything – more of this later
- The building is very much a site to behold, and innovation is baked into it
 - Across its 45,000 square metres every inch carries the mission of the institution
 - QNL is a triple function national library:
 - National: To act as a steward of Qatar's national heritage by collecting, preserving and making available the country's recorded history.
 - Research: to foster and promotes greater global insight into the history and culture of the Gulf region.
 - Public: provides equal access for all Qatari residents to an environment that supports creativity, independent decision-making and cultural development.
 - This last element is quite rare indeed – a national library that lends, with a Children's and Young Adults Library incorporated
 - Some of you will know its designer, Rem Koolhaas, the Dutch architect behind many world-famous buildings – including the Seattle Public Library
 - HH asked Rem to design a state-of-the-art building that would achieve a balance between content availability and accessibility on the one hand, and content preservation and security on the other.
 - Without a doubt, it is an Incredible place to walk into every morning to work

2. Innovation in the building

- Between the vision of HH and Rem, the building came to embody certain values:
 - It should be transparent in its functions - from the moment you walk in, the entire building is open before you
 - It should embrace openness and equality
 - It should be intuitive to use to facilitate learning
 - It should compel the library staff to act with a sense of adventure, and freedom
- Building keeps calling on us to implement innovative programmes for users
 - For me, this is down to the potential of space – there is so much of it
 - The building has been opened up, and the possibilities can be seen almost every time you walk through it
 - We have a large central plaza, which can host whatever furniture we wish to place on it, in whatever layout
 - We have a huge central performance space, not tucked away but in the centre of the library
 - Leads to great juxtapositions, as when the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra are playing every month, and the sound of music fills the library as people carry out their work and study hundreds of metres away
 - And then we do have quiet spaces, more traditional study areas, group rooms and individual study carrels
 - We've tried to open up all of these spaces to the public to utilise their ideas, and are trying to build our programming around the way our users want to utilise the building and its services
- The bones of the building support this, by removing some of the visible functions of the library so that the core – the books and the services - remain
 - The catalogue can be checked when you're actually in between the shelves by consulting one of hundreds of iPads
 - Once you've got a book, checking it in and out is fully automated
 - The architect built the book return system into the shelves themselves
 - Our book sorting system is state-of-the-art
 - Uses Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags in every book
 - Only problems so far have been with kids returning oversize books!
 - We have built a people-mover system within the boundary of the library to ensure those with mobility difficulties can get around

3. The shiny bits

- I think we have all heard that innovation is not just about technology and I agree. Yet I have to mention how QNL's technology is key to our innovative programmes
- To contextualise this, I should recall that the unique shape of the library building was constructed according to a specific image – that of two pages of a book that are pulled apart and folded diagonally at the corners to create a shell-like structure, which encloses the open-plan interior.
- Through this design, the architect sought to present the structure as a monument to the enduring value of the book – something that can clearly be seen in the way the shelves are open facing and inviting browsing
- So print is honoured, and encouraged. And yet – digital technology is found throughout the building, and is essential to support innovation
 - Media Walls – display event and programme information, are fully interactive and a hit with kids who can play competitive games on them
 - Interactive Totems – Digital Exhibitions
- Gaming centre
 - Xboxes and Playstations
- Digitisation Centre
 - In-house (Heritage Library), or supporting partners (Museum of Islamic Art)
- An assistive technology area with equipment and specialized software to enhance the experience of users with special needs
- PAC Centre
 - Cutting edge, world-class. IFLA PAC Centre for the Middle-East
 - (make a call for people who need help with their collections)
 - We have a chemical engineer on staff
- The jewel in QNL's crown is the Innovation station – a series of dedicated spaces with access to 3D printing and scanning equipment; an audio and video recording studio; a photography room with equipment for digital design; musical instruments, virtual reality accessories; do-it-yourself (DIY) electronics; and much more.
 - Across all the programmes offered in the Innovation Station: learning through making
 - Clubs, competitions – all involved are encouraged to not only learn how to use the technology but go back to the information sources that the library holds elsewhere, either in print or digital form
 - Adapting to young adults' learning patterns

4. A New Library Tradition

- All of these services have been working, and they've been attractive to users. Since we opened to the public in November, just six months ago
 - 221, 430 visitors
 - 398, 258 books have been borrowed
 - 66, 112 members have been registered
- But for me, QNL's fundamental innovation isn't actually about technology
 - It's about the gutsy idea to start a new library service in a country that doesn't have a tradition of libraries
 - Sure, there have been some small-scale efforts, but they have existed outside of the public sphere, or, more specifically, the digital age
 - At the same time as QNL staff have been learning how to serve the library to its users, our users have often been learning to use a library for the very first time
 - Looks of incredulity when people are told they can borrow a book – for free!
 - The immense gratitude expressed by families when they discover the facilities in the Children's Library
 - 240,000 of the nearly 400,000 books borrowed have been children's books
 - Returning to the library sector on the ground, it was interesting to me to experience this upside-down flip – I come from a culture where public libraries are long-existent and embedded, and now here I am in a place where they are truly starting for the very first time
- And because we're starting now, we're able to stand on the shoulders of giants – all of you who have gone before us, and all the accumulated knowledge in our profession
- QNL has inclusive departments embedded – resources for children, young adults, students, researchers and academics, visually impaired people and those with other disabilities – all of these user groups were able to be addressed in the design stage of the building, and not addressed as an afterthought
- So this starting point means we are trying to move quickly from providing basic services to designing innovative programmes
 - For example, our Science Book Forum is connecting schoolchildren and young students in Qatar with rocket scientists in Nasa, all through a more modern, interactive online approach, but coupled with an old-school reading programme – the idea being to move away from science information consumed through National Geographic and instead towards exciting and stimulating books that require greater concentration and engagement
 - *[Some words on creative writing workshops developing Arabic language content? Therefore also creating next generation of authors, supporting Arabic publishing]*

- The Qatar Digital Library also fits this mold. QNL's online platform for accessing digital heritage has been extremely successful and pre-dates the library building – but now we open we are able to move towards securing more bold agreements to expand it and bring Qatar's heritage back to the fingerprints of its people
 - I am overseeing partnership programmes to digitally repatriate records about Qatar and the Gulf held in libraries and archives in the UK, India, the Netherlands, France, Turkey and even Bulgaria and Russia
 - This is all within a mandate to go out and make the agreements necessary to either digitize information in its country of residence, or onsite, in our digitisation centre.

5. The Bigger Picture

- The connection between the library and the country's heritage is an extremely important one, and one that I need to point out
- Qatar is a young country in terms of full independence – it only gained its independence from the UK in 1971
- In many ways it is only beginning to truly pull together its national narrative, and to decide what it wants to be when it grows up
- Most people will know the country for only one thing: being extremely rich. But that ignores the people underneath, and the connection of the country to its region, and the history that shaped it.
- And it also obscures the deep thinking that Qatar is doing about where it wants to go next.
- It's therefore extremely important to see this building in its physical and philosophical context
- It sits in the heart of Doha's Education City
 - A huge area that houses 8 university campuses including University College London, Northwestern University, Texas A&M, Weill-Cornell, Georgetown, and others
 - It's in the centre of a learning and knowledge explosion, one that's been set up with a purpose
- There is a final part of QNL's mission I have not touched upon:
 - QNL also supports Qatar's transition from a reliance on natural resources to become a diversified and sustainable economy by providing support to students, researchers, and the public to promote life-long learning and empower individuals and communities for a better future.
- Qatar 2030
 - Country has a development plan
 - Contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals
- SDGs
 - Spent three years working on SDGs at a policy level

- Interesting to go from advocacy in the library community to become aware of them, to being a library staff member that is helping to provide programming that directly or indirectly supports the goals
- This is because in general, so many of our activities – those related to education, skills development, women and girls – support the SDGs. But how do we make this visible?
 - I’m aware that to find the time and capacity to put QNL’s activities in the SDGs context will take effort – but I am also sure it will be worth it
- One concrete project we will be pursuing is directly related to the SDGs – target 11.4 which calls for strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage
- The Project is titled “Supporting documentary heritage libraries in the Arab Region” and it will seek to reinforce existing cooperation between Qatar National Library and UNESCO in this area
 - The overall objective of this 18-month project is to map the situation of documentary heritage in the region in order to identify areas where capacity building and support is needed so as to exchange knowledge and contribute to the preservation and promotion of documentary heritage in the Arab region.
- This project is directly in national libraries’ area of expertise for the SDGs – all heritage libraries in the region are welcome to join us!

6. Conclusion

- QNL is re-approaching the library as a learning space, and it’s doing this through innovative space
- Open up the spaces of our buildings
- If we can change the way we use the space, we can change our approach
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_0AqegPE9U