

# Adding Classes and Content, Resurgent Libraries Turn a Whisper Into a Roar

By WINNIE HU JULY 4, 2016 New York Times Online



The Inwood Library in northern Manhattan is quiet, air-conditioned and open every day. Credit Alex Wroblewski for The New York Times

Matthew Carter's summer hideaway is not in the Hamptons, the Catskills or on the Jersey Shore. It does not require a car ride or a small fortune to keep up.

Mr. Carter, 32, an adjunct professor of music at the City College of New York, simply holes up at the Inwood Library in northern Manhattan with his research books. It is quiet, air-conditioned and open every day.

"I'm a total leech of public libraries," he said. "It's my summer hangout. It's where I spend the majority of my time, and where I'm most productive."



Joan Burress, center, and Benjamin Bythe, right, give instruction during a Sahaja Meditation session at the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library. Credit Emon Hassan for The New York Times

It is also a place where he has a lot of company.

Far from becoming irrelevant in the digital age, libraries in New York City and around the nation are thriving: adding weekend and evening hours; hiring more librarians and staff; and expanding their catalog of classes and services to include things like job counseling, coding classes and knitting groups.

No longer just repositories for books, public libraries have reinvented themselves as one-stop community centers that aim to offer something for everyone. In so doing, they are reaffirming their role as an essential part of civic life in America by making themselves indispensable to new generations of patrons.

Story time at libraries in Manhattan and the Bronx [is now so popular that ticket lines](#) must be formed, while coding classes have waiting lists in the thousands. A library in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, runs a fully equipped recording studio that can be reserved at no cost; many libraries in the borough lend laptops and portable wireless devices to those without internet access at home.

In Queens, which has a large South Asian population, a library in Jamaica offers sewing classes in Bengali for Bangladeshi women, some of whom now earn a living as seamstresses. Libraries in Flushing and South Jamaica teach social media skills to small-business owners.

Nationally, public libraries are redefining their mission at a time when access to technology, and the ability to use it, is said to deepen class stratification, leaving many poor and disadvantaged communities behind. Sari Feldman, president of the American Library Association, said library workers had shown people how to file online for welfare benefits and taught classes in science, technology, engineering and math to children who could not afford to go to summer camps.

“All libraries are having a renaissance,” Ms. Feldman said. “We’re seeing that libraries have really stepped up to take on roles that are needed in a community.”



The Charles H. Revson Foundation and the Stavros Niarchos Foundation have awarded \$170,000 to 11 winning libraries, including \$20,000 to the Inwood branch. Credit Alex Wroblewski for The New York Times

New York City’s 217 public libraries have rebounded in the past two years amid an infusion of city dollars, after years of budget and service cuts. An outpouring of support from library lovers has served as a reminder that the institutions are a crucial part of many lives.

A [recent contest to recognize](#) neighborhood libraries underscored their vitality: 18,766 online and paper nominations were submitted in one month, up from about 4,300 when the yearly competition was started in 2013. Nearly every library was nominated at least once. Some received hundreds of nods.

One young man wrote that he was homeless when he started going to the [Arverne branch of the Queens Library](#), where the staff not only helped him study to become a security guard but also hired him to work as a mentor to teenagers. Today, that man, Richard Johnson, has two jobs and his own apartment.

“Ever since becoming a member of the Queens Library, I have been bettering my life,” he wrote in his statement.

The city’s three library systems — the [New York Public Library](#), the [Brooklyn Public Library](#) and the [Queens Library](#) — have intensified their efforts to mobilize the public. An exhibit at the [New York Public Library](#)’s landmark building on Fifth Avenue last year highlighted [Andrew Carnegie](#)’s 1901 gift of \$5.2 million to build a network of city libraries, in a pointed reminder that the city had promised, in return, to pay for their operation and upkeep.

In the past two years, more than 250,000 people, including the author Judy Blume and the musician Patti Smith, have signed on to a letter campaign in support of the libraries. Library workers have held story time on the steps of City Hall, and showed up at budget hearings in bright orange T-shirts emblazoned with the words: “Keep Investing in Libraries, Keep Investing in New Yorkers.”



With its satellite libraries, inmates at the Rikers Island jail complex can now read books to their children at outside neighborhood branches, like this one at the Macon Library in Brooklyn. Credit Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times

The message was heard. In the 2016 fiscal year the libraries received \$360 million for operating costs, \$33 million more than the year before — the largest increase in recent times. For the 2017 fiscal year, which began on Friday, city financing for the libraries increased slightly to \$365

million. But in a more significant victory, city leaders agreed to preserve past increases in future budgets, the difference, say, between getting a one-year bonus or a permanent raise.

City Councilman Andy King, who represents northeast Bronx and is chairman of the Libraries Subcommittee, said previous years of budget cuts had left the libraries on life support. “I’m glad we’re in a financial position to let the blood flow again,” Mr. King, a Democrat, said. “Libraries are a lifeline, which we can’t afford to ever let fall again.”

Tony Marx, president of the New York Public Library, which has 92 branches in the Bronx, in Manhattan and on Staten Island, said library officials no longer had to worry about plugging budget holes and could instead focus on building services and programs. They have hired 120 more staff members, including 67 librarians for children and young adult literature alone. They have spent \$1.1 million on books and materials and expanded seats in early literacy programs for toddlers.

“We’re a mere year into this reinvestment, and the results are immediate: longer hours, more librarians and thousands more seats for education programming,” Mr. Marx said.

Libraries are now open on Saturdays, and in some cases, Sundays, too. At the Queens Library, which has 65 locations, more than 765,000 people visited on Saturdays alone from last November to May. Library officials have hired another 129 staff members and spent more than \$2.6 million on new books, including e-books and periodicals.

“We are energized and serving the needs of the people who come through our doors,” said Dennis M. Walcott, the president of the Queens Library and former schools chancellor, who works from a desk on the main floor of the Central Library in Jamaica so he can take questions and complaints in person.

The Brooklyn Public Library has hired 95 new staff members, two-thirds of whom are librarians, and bought 50,000 more books and other materials. Last year, about 8.7 million people used its 60 libraries, a 3 percent increase from the year before.

Linda Johnson, the president of the Brooklyn Public Library, said 552 satellite libraries had been set up in schools, senior centers and homeless shelters to promote literacy and bring books, technology and other services to those who are unable to visit their branches. Twenty of the satellites are at Rikers Island, the city’s main jail complex, where inmates can now read books to their children at outside neighborhood branches through video conferencing.

The library contest that drew so many nominations was the idea of Reynold Levy, 71, a former president of Lincoln Center and a lifelong user of libraries.

At the time, budget cuts had forced many branches to eliminate weekend hours. Mr. Levy saw the contest as a way for people to show city leaders how much they valued libraries and to express their appreciation to those who work in them. The contest was sponsored by the Charles H. Revson Foundation and the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and awarded a total of \$170,000 to 11 winning libraries, including \$20,000 to the Inwood branch.



Far from becoming irrelevant in the digital age, libraries in New York City and around the nation are thriving. Credit Alex Wroblewski for The New York Times

Mr. Levy, the chairman of Revson’s board of trustees, recalled that his first job, at age 14, was at the Brighton Beach library in Brooklyn, where he borrowed all his books. Four days a week, he would help check out books, collect fines and troll the aisles to make sure all the edges of the books were neatly lined up, climbing on stools to reach the upper shelves. “It was a dream of mine to be wealthy enough to build a library and buy books,” he said.

The recent gains by libraries have delighted Christian Zabriskie, a librarian and executive director of Urban Librarians Unite, an advocacy and education group that organizes an annual “read-in,” in which people take turns reading nonstop for 24 hours, to support the libraries.

“In New York City, there is somebody using library materials every second, every day of the year,” Mr. Zabriskie said. “It’s showing that libraries are the fabric of society.”

*A version of this article appears in print on July 5, 2016, on Page A19 of the New York edition with the headline: Resurgent City Libraries Turn a Whisper Into a Roar.*