

At Boston Public Library, new light and life for visitors



By **Yvonne Abraham** GLOBE COLUMNIST JANUARY 28, 2017

If you're looking to refresh your faith in our ability to achieve great things together, a public library is a good place to be.

I'm writing this in the newly renovated Johnson building at the Boston Public Library, on Boylston Street. Light filters through the skylight in the massive atrium, giving the whole place a lovely glow. The cheery effect is magnified by the burst of color designers have used here — bright reds, oranges, greens, and blues — a palette inspired by the renowned John Singer Sargent murals in the old building.

Around me, people of all ages and races are roaming, working at desks, or reading in cozy chairs. Across the way, the new children's library is crammed with little kids and their grown-ups, reading together as glowing lion cub lamps — a decorative echo of the marble lions in the stately McKim building next door — watch over them.

Libraries connect us to facts (remember those?) and to other people. They bring the world to us, and us to each other. They welcome everyone. And they're a testament to the good that government does.

The man who now leads this country, and his fans, seem convinced that government is not merely useless, but malevolent — a destructive force that takes from the people.

A library gives the lie to that politically useful, but dangerous, fiction. The remade Johnson building makes the counter-argument especially, in fact spectacularly, well.

The \$78 million renovation, by William Rawn Associates, is gorgeous. This building used to be a dark, hulking, foreboding place, its closed-off exterior distressingly at odds with its vital public purpose.

The library has thrown itself open to the city. The stone plinths that once faced the street — like concrete barriers guarding against attack — have been removed, and giant windows bring light and the world inside.

“People found it daunting, like a mausoleum or a bunker,” says David Leonard, the library's president, on a recent tour. “Now there's a sense of welcome. It's dynamic.”

Before, he says, you had to meander a long way into the library before you found employees, or even books. Now, walking in from Boylston is a joy: On your left are the library's newest arrivals, set up like a bookstore, with staffers

to recommend titles. To your right there is a cafe, and a WGBH studio from which Boston Public Radio broadcasts.

The renovation enshrines the fact that libraries are no longer just about books, but about providing respite and services, and building community — from the new business library, which includes work space for startups, to the new power outlets at every desk. On the mezzanine, a learning center offers computer and language classes, and meeting rooms where people join conversation circles.

People seem to love it. The library welcomed 3.6 million visitors in 2016, compared with 3.4 million in 2015. The BPL lent out 4.9 million books and other materials last year, compared with 4.4 million the previous year.

This place is alive and ambitious, with spaces and fixtures that aren't just utilitarian, but beautiful. Pieces from the library's art collection are more visible and plentiful than before. Like the breathtaking 1895 McKim building, the new Central Library says not just, "You deserve a library," but, "You're worth a welcoming public space in which to aspire."

Every building in the city should say that. Too many don't (Ugh, the Seaport District).

Seeing this much-maligned modern building's transformation makes you wonder about another one: What if we could apply this vision inside Boston City Hall?

But that's a dream for another day. For now, we should revel in this rediscovered friend in Copley Square — a reminder of our greatest ambitions as a city and nation. We need it now more than ever.

Yvonne Abraham is a Globe columnist. She can be reached at yvonne.abraham@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@GlobeAbraham](https://twitter.com/GlobeAbraham).