

# San Diego's New Central Library

## An In Depth Interview:

The current Central Library was built 57 years ago for a city one third our current size.

After 50 council directed studies and over 35 years of discussion and indecision, construction of a new heart for San Diego's library system has finally been approved.

Rob Quigley, design architect for the library, recently sat down with author and photographer Brighton Noing to discuss the project in depth. Mr. Noing met with Quigley over a pint of Guinness near his home and studio in Little Italy.

*Thank you for spending this time with us, Mr. Quigley. I understand that you, Tucker/Sadler Architects and the design team have been working on this project for some time.*

Over thirteen years. After a national selection process, we were hired in 1996. We are actually the new kids on the block; many San Diegans have been working much longer on this than we have.

*This is an important public project. Did regular San Diegans have any input or impact on your design?*

As far as I know, the central library has had more public input than any other civic project in the history of the city. Before we proposed a design or even drew a line the city sponsored a series of participatory workshops at our request. They were open to anyone and attended by over 700 people. The ideas that were generated from that public brainstorm, included the reading room, the dome form, the "public penthouse" activities and the desire for a rational yet iconic building.



Public Workshop

That public input has been used like a road map, guiding our design effort over all of these years and for the three different downtown sites that we looked at.

An even more unusual event took place after we had finished three different concept level designs for the first site. Hugh Davies, of the Museum of Contemporary Art, sponsored a 2,500 square foot exhibit of the three schemes including dozens of study models and hundreds of hand sketches and computer models. 2600 people attended and left comments and recommendations regarding the schemes in a suggestion box. One scheme was the bare bones box required to meet the city's requested \$60 million budget (these are construction costs, not total project costs), one scheme had the iconic dome, public reading room and other amenities requested by the public at around \$120 million of construction cost and the third scheme split the difference. By the way, these designs were for a much smaller library than we have at the current site in East Village.

*It's too bad they don't have this sort of input process on all of our major projects. What did those first comments tell you?*

82.6% preferred the Dome design even though it was the most expensive of the three schemes we presented. Almost 70% said things like "do it right, we will only do this once in my lifetime."

*So budget was now no object?*

Hardly! We were directed to include all of the amenities of the dome scheme but somehow accomplish it with the midlevel budget.



Interactive Museum Museum

*So there were actually two public exhibitions. I attended the second museum show in the same gallery sometime later when you were soliciting input on the final design. You had the 47 previous studies arranged on a shelf- all coming to the same conclusion: we need a new library. I remember wondering when we would elect leaders that could finish something rather than begin something over and over again.*

Yes, leadership at last. Mayor Sanders and this council saw the opportunity and finally got closure. Only two members voted against the project. Strangely, most of those that spoke against the project are fiscal conservatives.

*What do you mean?*

I think that everyone understood that a “no” vote would have sent the State Grant we won, \$20 million of our tax money, to build a library in some other city. Less understood is the very real construction cost benefit of building today. The final cost estimate, done five years ago, predicted an increase in construction costs of \$700,000 to \$800,000 for every month of delay. For the first, and I hope the last time in my 35 years of practice, we have a recession horrible enough to have eliminated over \$42 million of normal cost inflation.

In addition to this \$62 million, the fundraisers tell me that at least half of the \$40 million plus donations are Central Library specific and would disappear with a “no” vote. A delay would also have required us to redesign and respecify the project to changed codes at a cost of perhaps \$3 million.

*Wow, no wonder the council voted to go ahead now. A delay would have cost taxpayers at least \$83 million!*

*It seems that people who say “now is not the right time” are not very good at arithmetic. All I read in the papers was that the “yes” vote put the city “on the hook” for the remaining \$32.5 million needed to complete the construction with out using general funds.*

Yes, the worst case scenario is that the city would have to fund a little over \$30 million for the library. Most cities would consider a \$185 million library for \$32.5 million a steal. In San Diego it is a “risk”!

The council was wise to the “chicken little” spin going on here. It is not that the city is on the hook for spending a little over \$30 million, it is the taxpayers who were on the hook to lose over \$80 million.

*I understand that some kind of a charter high school going into the library. How can that be? Won't there be conflicts with high school kids running thru the library to class? What about lock downs? And how is there enough room?*



Seattle Main Library

It is an exciting proposal and is actually a remarkably seamless fit.

Happily, our city learned from the Convention Center and current main library. We were instructed to create two extra floors for future long term library expansion. These

floors were intended for non-library uses for the first 20 years. They have their own dedicated elevators, circulation system, restrooms and mechanical system since they needed to function separately from the library itself. They even have their own street entry and lobby. So from a physical standpoint, the school can be completely separate from the library or integrated with it or any combination in-between.

The educational potential of the school/library combination is breathtaking, there would be nothing in the country like it.

*Not to be discouraging, but I have some neighbors who say that, with the internet, libraries are no longer needed. Is that true?*



Salt Lake City Main Library

Those neighbors evidently haven't had a chance to visit a library lately. In every city, library attendance is up dramatically (*he shows me a March 2009 NYT article showing library attendance up across the nation*). Ironically, perhaps, the internet seems to be one of the reasons for this increase. The more affluent trend to forget that not everyone has access to, or can afford high speed internet access. And, of course, the vast majority of information is not digitized and not accessible. Google director of technology Eric Schmidt said “My guess is that it will be about 300 years until computers are as good as, say, your local reference library in doing search.” People also need assistance and computer education (especially those of us over 40 or so) - the library provides that service. In fact, more people learn how to use the internet at libraries than anywhere else. Visit the old downtown main library right now and you will see people waiting in a long queue for computer access.

Sociologists say that there is another more subtle reason that library attendance has risen during the digital age. Communication made possible by the efficiency of the internet and other electronic systems has also resulted in more personal isolation. Somewhat ironically, people seem to desire increased physical interaction and social community. My daughter, for instance, had everything she needed in her college high-tech dorm room. But she often choose to study at the University library, even though she was working alone. We seem to be wired to function as social animals - being a physical part of a larger social community is part of the human condition.

The third reason library usage has increased concerns resources available in a modern central library. They are now cultural centers and community gathering places as

well as research and archival resources. Our new main library will have a series of specialized uses apart from the traditional roles of a library. Wired community meeting rooms of varying sizes, from small group spaces to the rooftop Special Events room, will be available for public use. The ground level Auditorium will be used for music, lectures and even City Council meetings. There will be a Tech Center, an area for teens separate from the extensive children's area, an art gallery and even a small cafe with a quiet, shady place to sit and have a cup of coffee.



Arcade reading nook

The modern library is a hybrid, full of both books and technology and is really the gateway to the information revolution.

Your neighbors might be interested in knowing that cities on the cutting edge of technology, such as Seattle and San Jose, have studied this question at length and have very recently elected to invest heavily in new central libraries.

*If libraries are more popular than ever. I assume it is mostly older people?*

Attendance had been rising steadily and is now up dramatically because of the down economy. Researchers from Pew Internet and the University of Illinois were surprised to find that young adults are the heaviest users. They noted that "The (false) notion has taken hold in our culture that these wired up, heavily gadgeted young folk are swimming in a sea of information and don't need to go to places where information is."

*Sometimes San Diego seems like a strange place to me. It votes to spend over three hundred million dollars on a piece of grass and some bleachers that are vacant most of the year. Then it balks for 35 years at spending half that on a free library open to everyone. How do you explain that?*

Well, there are some similarities between the Central and sports venues. They both provide entertainment, both help create a sense of pride in the community, and both return economic benefits to the community that may not be obvious at first. Also, both create jobs. Petco, for instance, has been very beneficial to the economy of downtown. But then, there are some differences. The

library requires no tickets, it hasn't had a losing season in over 4000 years, and they let anyone play! The library is also better attended, even in the off-season.

Seriously, though, good cities need both cultural and entertainment resources. It isn't about one or the other, we need both. It is about priorities though, and certainly there are legitimate questions about creating private wealth with public money.

Like our streets, the library system is essential infrastructure. The difference is that our children, unlike automobiles, can't be easily rehabilitated after negotiating the potholes of a badly maintained road.

*What is your response to those who say the New Central is some kind of gold-plated ego trip. They say a warehouse in Kearny Mesa would be just fine.*

Anyone who thinks that a library is just a warehouse for books probably hasn't gotten off the couch for quite a while. As we have discussed, they are so much more than that. You don't have to believe me, just visit Seattle, Vancouver, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Phoenix etc.

On the issue of costs, I can only address the city's proposed investment in the construction of the building. The target budget we have been working with is lower than most other West coast main libraries. In an apples to apples comparison to San Francisco or Seattle for instance, we will spend significantly less than they did per square foot of construction.

A more appropriate question might be "Why would



Rendering by Joe Cordell

anyone want to do the one cultural and educational resource open to all San Diegans on the cheap?" Getting back to those original citizen input comments, they said don't shortchange ourselves and our children on the amenities and durability of regional resource that is designed to last 100 years.

*They made a good point, it would be nice to have something other than the weather to be proud of.*

*So there does seem to be a reason that they call San Diego, rather than Seattle or San Francisco, "K-Mart by the Sea"*

Well, to be fair, it's a larger issue than just San Diego. A high level State administrator in Sacramento once told me that they didn't care how much they spent on new

State buildings, as long as they *looked* cheap to the taxpayers. Here, we have been asked to do exactly the opposite- design a iconic first class library that is actually inexpensive to build.

*That's interesting, so when people call the New Central a monument or Taj Mahal it is actually a complement. We are building cheaper than other cities, but people think we are getting an architectural palace.*

In many parts of the country, and San Diego is one, perceptions of what constitutes community pride have changed. There was a time when all cities considered it



Original San Diego Central Library

a point of pride, even a point of civic honor, to create the best and most beautiful civic resources possible. There wasn't a library, public school, city hall or state capitol built in the 1800's that was not the best that could be produced with the resources available.

Think of the Boston or New York public libraries, or the stately city halls and courthouse buildings in small midwest towns.

There was a time when our city also took enormous pride in creating the public realm. Look at Balboa Park. Both the Park and the structures were created when San Diego had a tiny fraction of the population

and resources it has now. How many generations have benefitted because of their vision and economic sacrifices. Our original main library was an ornate, lavishly detailed building with a commanding civic presence set in a landscaped park. No one confused pride of public ownership and richness of resources with frivolous



1952 Central Library

architectural monuments.

Sometime between the creation of that building and the construction of the second main library in 1952, something changed in San Diego. The newspaper reviews in 1954 talk proudly about how little money was spent on the facility and about how "functional" it was. It was clear that "functional" was defined quite narrowly as "easy to maintain" and flexible. That the building was socially and emotionally dysfunctional from the onset and engendered little, if any, civic pride did not seem to be an issue. Our city leaders of the day beamed with accomplishment. Their grandparents would have been ashamed.

Fortunately, not all American cities and politicians fell for the "cheap is more responsible" ethic. I think San Diego also has changed and has matured. There is growing support for building a central library that all San Diegans will take pride in owning - from the Mayor and Council to the neighborhoods.

*As long as the city doesn't spend a dime from the general fund and you do it more cheaply than anyone else!*

Well, yes, although I prefer to think of it as more *efficiently* than anyone else. While we have worked hard with the City and contractor to keep costs low, the poetry and emotion that is part of all good civic architecture has not been lost. The last main library lasted for almost sixty years, this one will need to serve 100 years or more.

*Lets get back to economics. This City is still a mess. Even with a funding plan that uses no general fund money, and the economic benefits that you outlined earlier, is now really the right time to build?*

Over the long effort to build a new main library, we have passed through some of the most solvent and economically optimistic times in the history of the city and state. Yet, not once during that 35 year period was there a consensus that the "right time", had come to fund the needed library. In San Diego, the glass is always half empty- even when it comes to critical cultural and educational infrastructure.

*Yes, we have had some incredibly good economic times over the last three decades and, now that you mention it, I can't remember one time when the Taxpayer's Association or other watchdog groups sent out a press release alerting the council that now is the time to invest in civic infrastructure.*

*So are we a city of "can't do" pessimists where the sky is always falling or is it a civic inferiority complex?*

I'm not sure. San Jose voters passed a bond for twenty-seven new branch libraries and a new main during the last economic upturn. My firm is finishing two of those branches now.

*It seems to me that many here define political and economic responsibility very narrowly or even selfishly: fill the pot hole on my street but don't build libraries for our children, spend money on more police and courthouses, but not on educational resources that help prevent poverty which helps prevent crime.....*

That brings me to the second point. Good cities never lose sight of their values. Never.

I was recently reading "Brunelleschi's Dome" by Ross King. He recounts the building of the central church in Florence during the Renaissance. By coincidence, it is capped by a dome that is about the same size as ours. In an age of monotheism, this was not just a religious project, it was a major civic undertaking. Started in 1296, it took almost 150 years to complete. Transposing Renaissance time to our modern pace of life, I figure San Diego's new central library is just slightly behind their schedule.

At any rate, for 140 years, thru economic feast and famine, thru massive political struggles and power exchanges, the project always continued. Problems were not confined to economics. In 1402, the Milanese army had surrounded Florence and was at the city gates. And what was the city doing besides sending their men into battle and melting jewelry into canon balls? They were holding an architectural design competition for the famous bronze doors of the Baptistry!

They never lost their perspective or their vision. They understood that civic pride was even more important in the bad times than in the good times.

In 1347, the Black Death wiped out four-fifths of the population in twelve months. There were a least five other plagues that devastated the city and the crews working on the "duomo". Construction never stopped.

And you think San Diego's pension fund is a catastrophic problem?

*Wow, that's an inspirational example! Where can find that book?*

Are you kidding?

*I've got some other architectural questions. Why the dome?*

The dome was one of the suggestions that San Diegans

gave us during the series of public design workshops held in 1996. Three schemes with varying price tags were developed early in the process and the "dome" was the overwhelming favorite when presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1997. The dome design has been refined over the years and now, as envisioned by many at the workshop, it promises to be a defining iconographic element or symbol for the city. As you can see from the model studies, it will be especially dramatic at night when it is lit from energy collected during the day from solar cells.

*I've heard that the glass dome is an expensive frill and not functional.*

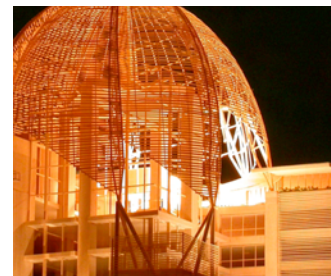
Architecture, as opposed to just construction, must function both practically and emotionally.

First of all, the dome is not glass but an open lattice or shade trellis. From a purely practical standpoint the lattice provides critical sun shading for the reading room reducing the air conditioning load while retaining views. It also helps protect the 9th floor outdoor terraces from our afternoon breezes and makes them more usable.

One of the unique qualities of the design is the public penthouse level on the 9th floor (another idea from the citizen input workshops). A series of lovely terraces will capture bay views and provide access to amenities such as the Special Events Room, the Art Gallery and the main Reading Room.

Importantly, this is a civic building, and like all successful civic buildings, it must also function on an emotional and symbolic level.

The dome is an ancient architectural form that ties us not only to our own Balboa Park, but to the larger history of civic and community architecture. It has long served as a symbol of enlightenment and democracy in our culture. On the other hand, the cutting edge structural engineering and unique design and detailing of the dome is fresh and contemporary. More than any other building downtown, it will embody San Diego's commitment to the future.



Eighth Floor Reading Room

So, while the dome connects to both the past and to the future, it also separates. It separates and distinguishes this civic resource from the many commercial towers and residential buildings which will surround it. Over 140' in diameter, the dome will anchor the nighttime cityscape with a soft and welcoming glow.

*At the unveiling of the final design some time ago, you were studying the possibility that the lattice sunshades on the dome and the facades might also be photovoltaic cells which would provide electrical energy for the building. Is that still a possibility?*

Placing collectors on the thin lattice sunshades was not cost effective. We are using the flat roof areas of the building for photovoltaics but our building roof area, in relation to the usable library area is rather small. An interesting idea might be to use the adjacent Petco parking lots as a location for additional photovoltaic panels. They could take a trellis or tree form, provide significant energy for the library and, equally important, shade some downtown asphalt which is currently acting as a heat sink.

*Why hasn't the architectural design been more controversial? I happened to be in Seattle when they were building their now world famous central library. Everybody was for building a library but the controversy over the design was unbelievable- it wasn't just the negative Blogbozos we are all familiar with, it was respected architects and knowledgeable critics slamming the design in great detail. Of course, after it was finished and became such a source of pride for the Seattle region, they ate crow.*

That's a good question. It's true historically that most if not all lasting architecture is very controversial before it is built. You could argue that I should be worried that our design is only slightly controversial.

*I once read that good architects, like good political leaders should nudge citizens to truths just beyond their vision.*

I like to think that the public input process, as well as our

commitment to making a truly "San Diego" building gave people here a greater sense of ownership in the design. As exciting as the Seattle library is, it is a "foreign" intervention from a design standpoint and has little to do with the NorthWest tradition.

*Why was the site changed from Kettner to the East Village location for the New Central?*



As all San Diegans know, we live in a city that likes to be very, very thorough. This project has been studied relentlessly for over 35 years. The forty seven studies produced over that period looked at locations in Mission Valley, Hillcrest, Downtown and other areas. Since the architectural team was hired in 1996, we have designed the library on four different Downtown sites. Interestingly, since we started, San Jose, Salt Lake City, and Seattle all conceived, funded, constructed and opened new downtown main libraries.

Happily, I think the City finally settled on the best site. It was recommended by a Citizen's Design Review Committee and unanimously approved by the Mayor and Council. It's symbolically important for this kind of regional resource to be downtown. It also is very accessible to both private cars and public transportation, more so than the other sites that we worked with. The capacity of East Village site is also a significant plus. It is slightly larger than a city block, which makes the very large floor plates required in a modern library possible.

Lastly, from an urban design standpoint, the library will make an important contribution to the "Bay to Park Link" concept. For almost one hundred years, San Diego has been trying to find a way to link its two most important physical resources, Balboa Park and the Bay. Finally, 12th Avenue is being enhanced to provide that link. The library, with its block-long two story sidewalk arcade and gardens will provide a critical "civic moment" as the long tree-lined boulevard turns toward the Bay.

The site is also well positioned to serve neighborhoods outside of downtown that aren't fortunate enough to have their own libraries like Sherman Heights, Golden Hill, South Park, Bankers Hill and etc.

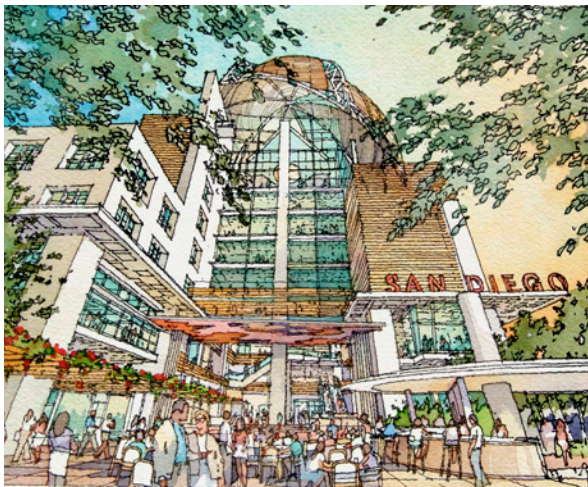
*Like many cities, we have a centralized library system where a single main library, like the trunk of a tree, feeds supports and replenishes its branches. As I understand it this central hub stores and delivers books to the branches, provides tech and reference support,*



*manages programs for the branches, and manages the online catalogue and data base. Of course, this is the place where one of a kind resources are stored. But apart from management and unique archival resources, how is it different from the neighborhood libraries?*

Yes, there is a reason neighborhood libraries are called "branches".

It's important to realize that the library is a system and the Central is the heart of that system. It is a little disingenuous to say that you support your neighborhood library but don't care about your Central Library. The branches are only as healthy as their supporting trunk and roots.



View from Ground Level Garden Court to Lobby

Cafe at right.

As you say, the collection at the central library has a depth and richness not possible at the branches. Specialized staff and one of a kind resources and educational programs are only found at the Central. The I CAN center houses specialized computer equipment for disabled users, including Low Vision, Developmental Disability and Mobility Assistance Computers for instance.

Socially, the Central is similar to a branch library but the scale and depth of resources makes it very different. As we discussed earlier, instead of the one small community meeting room you might find at a neighborhood library, there are many in the new main - ranging in scale from small to very large special event venues. Included are both indoor and outdoor meeting and public gathering places. San Diego, according to our Chamber of Commerce, has the most benign climate in the United States, yet it has a downtown without one compelling outdoor public gathering place. Good cities have good gathering spaces. The ground level Garden Court will be that kind of space and I hope it will be the first of many. Branch libraries are also very limited in their ability to

exhibit art. Instead of a wall or corner of a room dedicated to art as occurs at a neighborhood library, the Main will have a 3500 sf gallery specifically designed for art. An outdoor sculpture court is also provided. The focus will be on local artists but it will also be capable of hosting traveling shows. As you know, the arts is one of the economic engines that fuel our economy, and the region is missing this type of venue.

One of the more exciting conversations has been about electronically linking the Central with academic resources like UCSD and cultural resources like the amenities at Liberty Station. You might be able to sit in the ground floor auditorium downtown and hear (and see) a lecture in real time at Calit 2 for example or go to a UCSD auditorium and watch a City Council meeting taking place at the New Central. This speaks not only to connivence and social interaction, but to sustainability and energy savings.

Apart from the physical resources, a wealth of technology will be available to the public. Wireless internet, hundreds of public computers, a learning classroom and an internet center are planned. The Young Adult area is the size of a small neighborhood library. A special Teen Center will likely become one of the more popular hangouts.

As I've said, libraries have become the community centers of our day. San Diego's new Central will accommodate those types of activities on a regional scale instead of a neighborhood scale.

But there is something more that is harder to describe. You probably wouldn't dream of staging your daughter's wedding in your neighborhood library, but I'm willing to bet that the Reading Room or the Garden Court will see that type of activity.

*Actually, it's getting late and I do have one last issue. I understand that the downtown redevelopment agency is paying for over half of the library project.*

That's right. The Central Library, of course, is much bigger than the Redevelopment Agency and downtown. It is a regional technical and social resource, and the "engine" that enables the services of all the neighborhood branches, but it also is part of the downtown redevelopment effort to take density pressure off of the neighborhoods. So CCDC is a logical and

appropriate funding source.

As you know, redevelopment in the East Village area, fueled by the success of the Ballpark and the promise of the new Central, has been enormously successful. Property values have increased in the East Village in part because of the library project. Businesses relocate to our region, and people buy condos downtown because of the quality of the resources such as the library.

On a local level, this will be the "branch" library for the eight downtown neighborhoods. The greater downtown neighborhood, by the way, is projected to have 90,000 residents by 2020! It is within walking distance for most of them and easy trolley distance for all of them. Adjacent communities such as Golden Hill, Sherman Heights and the Barrio will also benefit from the increased library services and resources.

Lastly, it is not widely understood, but redevelopment funds generated by downtown development can only be used in the same redevelopment area. The genius in this financing plan is that a significant amount of CCDC money is being used on an amenity that benefits all San Diegans, not just those who live downtown where the money was generated.

*O.K. so to review: The entire Central Library project including construction costs has been fixed at \$185 million. \$80 million will come from these redevelopment funds, \$20 million from a grant from the state, \$20 million from the School District and \$30.8 million from donors so far. I understand that \$10 million has also been donated towards operating costs. That's \$150.8 million in the bank not counting the operating gift. So, even if there are no more donations, the city might be on the hook for less than \$35 million dollars. Am I missing something, or isn't even this very unlikely worst case a hell of a deal for the taxpayers?*

Yes, most cities actually pay for most of their central library, usually by bonding. Our city bonded for the current Central Library for example and there is talk about bonding for a new convention center expansion.

*How does the current fundraising picture look?*

After 35 years of inaction and broken promises, and when construction was *still* up in the air, Judith Harris, Mel Katz and the Library Foundation raised all of that money. It is amazing that so many came forward under those circumstances. Irwin and Joan Jacobs even gifted a significant part of the daily operating costs.

Talk to any fundraiser and she will tell you that once a project starts construction and people see that it is actually being built, donations begin to pour in. I was involved the New Children's Museum and that is exactly what happened. Construction will take two and a half years, so there is plenty of time, and the funding campaign to date has been only focused on large donors. San Francisco, for instance, raised substantial amounts of money from grassroots efforts. Many people would be happy to give small donations and be a part of the effort. They just haven't been asked yet.

*Before you go, what will happen next?*

Turner Construction will begin work on July 28th!

*Thank you Mr. Quigley. So after 37 years of effort, at long last the stars have aligned. Not to be too cynical, but it seems like big projects usually happen only when some special interest is going to make money. With the Central Library and the library system, the only special interest is us - the public.*

Let me leave you with this, I was reading an article by David Wysocki, a librarian up in L.A. He pointed out that most government services are based on the principle that things will always go wrong: crime happens so we need a police force; fires occur so we need a fire department; people get sick so we need hospitals. Then he says:

"The library is that rare sanguine institution within a generally pessimistic system. It is eternally hopeful. The existence of a library is society's way of saying to the individual, "We believe in your potential. You are important to us. We've provided this resource because we know that we'll be paid back many times for our investment in you."

