CULTURE AND EDUCATION IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES
the case of an experiment in Argentina through the Mariano Moreno Cultural Association

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The Mariano Moreno Cultural Association is a non-profit private organization that defines a community policy for the development of public cultural and educational services through the Mariano Moreno Public Library and Cultural Complex, as a pilot project of demonstration devoted to permanent information, continued education and lifelong learning.

It is located in Bernal, a city of 150,000 inhabitants and a part of southern Greater Buenos Aires City. It has an urban, commercial and industrial topography.

The Library was founded in 1932 by a group of 16 neighbours — workers and students — whose will and determination made possible the inception of the institution.

The Association owns and runs the public library services for the whole community,
reaching neighbouring counties as well. Its management is entirely independent of
local, state and national governments.

In fact, the origin of popular libraries in Argentina goes back to the late 19th century.
President Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, formerly Ambassador to the United States,
sent a bill to the National Congress to give rise and to enable small and scattered
libraries with community participation and initial support for the improvement of
services, as free reading tools aiding the start of the public school system. Said bill
was enacted on September 23, 1870, under number 419 creating the National
Commission for the Protection of Popular Libraries. The Commission was
responsible for the promotion, official recognition, inspection and 50% funding of
popular libraries established under its protection.

After his experience in the United States, Sarmiento learnt that people could benefit
from having access to well-resourced libraries as an opportunity to develop well-
informed citizenship and to preserve free thinking and democracy. He thought about
the needs of distant towns, the strong importance of reading good books in Spanish
literature, the translations of renowned foreign authors, and the future demands for
knowledge in Argentina. By 1876 200 libraries worked under the auspices of the
library act and during more than a century popular libraries have been receiving very
scanty funding from government sources. It means that different governments in the
political arena did not give a concerned priority to back this type of institution, and
community growth demanding other basic services became a barrier to developing a
well-organized public library system with improved human and economic resources
and modern information technologies.

As I said before, the Mariano Moreno Library was founded in 1932. In 1959, under
the pressure of community demands and a very old and small building, a party of
1000 neighbours granted one square metre of land, thus allowing the challenging
steps to purchase a central and best-suited vacant lot, where the modern pilot
building of the library and cultural complex stands today after long-term community
efforts.

With a decision for innovative professional ideas, linking library services with cultural
and non-formal educational activities, the library building was constructed under a
model design selected in a public architectural contest. Comparative studies of needs
and facilities were initially carried out in the United States and Canada as a new
community challenge, which included community socio-cultural and educational
diagnosis performed with university research and the economic aid of UNESCO.
Community leadership and huge efforts were successful in getting the endorsements
of the National Ministries of Education, Social Affairs and Interior — later on
transferred to the Ministry of Economy — which allowed the financing of seven years
of construction and equipment from 1973 to 1980 and, later, functional financing
through government contributions until 1996. Also, further economic aid arrived from
citizens, patrons, industries, businesses, foundations and other institutional sources.
Therefore, in 1980 onwards the six-floor building with a total of 4650 square metres
was opened to increasing free public use. To these ends a tight financial
administration and teamwork of different professions, convened by the Cultural
Association Board heads, was performed under a number of normative policies.
Thus, the community of Bernal and neighbouring areas had full opportunities for
reading and general information searching as well as a strong programme of non-
formal education and many cultural activities of its own and from other sources, local,
national and international.

Today the library’s holdings amount to 60,000 volumes of books, 1500 cultural and
educational videos and other special formats, and including a very complete
reference collection. Library staff training was accomplished in 1992 in order to reach
the automation of the catalogues through Microisis software freely supplied by
UNESCO. In terms of extension to strengthen library information to public schools
through books, videos, and cultural activities, the project pioneered in the country
bookmobile services with further design and construction by the National
Commission of Popular Libraries. For such a purpose the library building included
bookmobile accommodation plus living facilities for special visitors.

As an integrated operative unit, the Cultural Complex today offers many activities
with community participation in about 20 non-formal courses per year, workshops,
seminars, lectures, theatre plays, concerts, shows, movies, art and science exhibit
areas, AV lab and TV set, a public auditorium with 400 seats, among other facilities.
In addition, a public Plaza and green reserve across the library building offers
summer activities in the open air, as well as a permanent playground for children and
general public recreation. Public learning and use of computing applied services are
also established as a permanent activity.

Some projects on-going or to be accomplished by the experimental programme

1. The improvement of public library collections to reach a full planned building
capacity of 150,000 books and other items, enhancing investment in modern
information equipment and to strengthen the already available reference collections.

2. To enlarge Children and Juvenile collections linked to a number of educational and
cultural activities, emphasizing the priority given to book and image-reading projects.

3. To widen the Extension Programme to a number of public schools deprived of
school library services, through available bookmobile and other information
technologies. Obviously this item is very much attached to the purposes of the
previous item.

4. To enhance the current newspaper and journal service with internet access linked
to public computers in a comfortable site with the provision of a self-service cafeteria.

5. To strengthen municipal cooperation in library personnel fellowships and contracts,
and also in the improvement and maintenance of the Association Plaza. Mural
painting contests, open-air chess games, and other cultural activities are held
annually in this public facility.

6. To ensure wider information networking with other libraries, implying the operation
of a node with the National Library and the National Teachers Library of the Ministry
of Education, Science and Technology, and to continue public training through
computer programs and therefore to enhance available resources from the web.
7. To continue daily video recording from selected cultural, educational and scientific programmes using the facilities of decoded production such as that of the Iberoamerican Educational TV Association supplied through an agreement with the Bariloche Foundation and the cooperation of the Government of Spain.

8. To introduce fraternity agreements with advanced public libraries from other countries in order to exchange human resources, information on different available sources, exchange of cultural activities and the professional training of librarians. The first agreement has already been signed with Queens Public Library of New York.

9. To improve the cooperation in arts fields through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which has appointed the Association as a leading regional delegate centre. The NEA has already granted funding for theatre improvement, equipment and other facilities.

10. To design, share and fulfil a postgraduate career programme in education and research for public librarians open to international cooperation as a project with a national university accredited library school.

11. To renew strong leadership to cooperate and give technical assistance for local, state and national public library legislation. The National Library Act of 1986, which the National Congress passed with unanimous approval and its regulation, adopted many ideas and experiences raised by the pilot social laboratory of the public library and cultural complex run by the Mariano Moreno Cultural Association.

12. Permanent training and software updating in all the areas of the institution with special emphasis on technical and administrative improvements. Public library staff training in literacy education extended to library customers.

13. To promote other media delivery and visual facilities such as the public lending of films and videos from the collection granted through an agreement with the National Film Board of Canada, and, in the same manner, to start a wide musical collection of CDs for public hearing and lending.

14. Last but not least, to explore new fund-raising sources from public and private sectors. Budget problems are always critical, particularly with the economic crisis going on in Argentina as a developing and regionally inserted country.

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