



LIBRARY AS STADIUM – THE NETHERLANDS

Vanessa Johnson says the Dutch celebrate their culture the way Australians celebrate sport, and libraries are their stadiums.

I became aware of the Dutch enthusiasm for libraries last year when seeking design inspiration for one of my assignments. In the course of my research I stumbled across a video tour of DOK in Delft and was mesmerized by the vibrancy and enthusiasm on show. The seed was planted – if ever I had the chance this was a place I wanted to visit.

Earlier this year the opportunity presented itself when I persuaded my husband of the benefits of a three week tour of Europe to celebrate an anniversary – little did he suspect it was to double as a library lover's tour. After travelling through Germany and Belgium we arrived in the Netherlands, and finally Delft, a picturesque town with canals, cobbled streets and old houses leaning against each other drunkenly.



A view of the children's area at the Openbare Bibliotheek, Amsterdam

DOK Library Concept Center is determinedly innovative and this is reflected in the décor and layout. Splashes of bright colour and thoughtful and varied furnishings make DOK a very pleasant place to spend time. The ground floor has a large selection of print resources arranged on stylish slate grey bookcases, as well as a large selection of internet-connected computer stations (and WiFi throughout). An expansive central staircase leads to the café and children's section which is a lively part of the DOK with plenty of bubble and chatter. The audio visual items are also located upstairs and dwarfed any collection I have seen in a local Australian library. DOK's entire collection contains 40,000 CDs, 9000 LPs, 3000 DVDs and 10,000 books of sheet music. DOK also has a large electronic gaming collection and artwork which can be borrowed. I came away from DOK wishing I had allowed more time to explore what seemed to be a vibrant, innovative and well-used community resource.

I had also read about Amsterdam's new central library and added it to my 'must see' list. As we approached the Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam (OBA) along the banks of the Amstel River it reminded me of Melbourne's South Bank. Crowds of people

were milling about and there was a buzz around the café bar near the entrance. As I walked into the OBA it was more like entering the foyer of a grand hotel than a library; a sense of space and light, super stylish décor, a young man tinkling the keys of a piano (the OBA is next to the Music Academy), and a hum of activity.

The building opened in 2007 and is spread over 10 levels, with central escalators like a shopping centre which provide sweeping views of multiple floors. As well as enormous print and audiovisual collections the library has a theatre, museum, restaurant, two reading cafes and a sound stage (where *This Week in Libraries* is recorded). It is open every day from 10am to 10pm and averages over 7000 visitors per day, with an average stay of 1½ hours. The OBA has a huge range of foreign language newspapers and 600 internet connected computers (WiFi too) – very handy for the traveller as well as regular visitors.

While I didn't have the chance to take part in any official library tours (they are available, I was just there on the wrong days) visiting the two libraries was very inspiring. The Dutch have a reputation for being innovative, forward thinking, liberal and proud of their culture and this is all reflected in their libraries.

If you find yourself travelling in the Netherlands (or indeed in any library-loving nation) I recommend taking the time to visit one or two libraries to soak up some of their enthusiasm. If you can't travel there in person, take a virtual tour and perhaps discover something which can spice up life at your library. There is a great video tour of the OBA on their home page at www.oba.nl, and a number of tours of DOK on YouTube, including one at www.youtube.com/itivideos#p/u/3/h0_hC4WW5al.

Vanessa Johnson

vanessa.johnson@postgrad.curtin.edu.au