

Books fly off the Shelf at ID "SoJa" Library Opening

Judith van Praag

Saturday morning, June 11, before the doors to the new International District/Chinatown Branch of the Seattle Public Library were festively opened, a patron slid the first item through the façade's check-in slot.

"Wow, I'm the first!" he exclaimed.

Shortly after, while officials presented their speeches, patrons flocked the floor, grabbing CD ROMs and Videos, searching the shelves for their favorite authors or subjects.

While books and audio-visual material "flew off the shelves" none of the new library's 12,000 items collection in 11 languages (including highly popular Manga novels) will be lend to other libraries during the coming three months.

Toan Nguyen (who 12 years ago took part in the Beacon Hill Public Library Student Associate Program, and now is a Coordinating Library Associate) pointed out his favorite author of scary stories, Nguyen Ngoc Ngan, "the Vietnamese Stephen King."

Julie Ann Olye, the manager of both the new I.D./ Chinatown and the Beacon Hill Branch, said every single person of her 9-member staff is bilingual. On different days of the week, patrons may find assistance in Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Ilocano and Tagalog, as well as in French, Spanish and Lithuanian.

Those who wish to make use of one of six full access computers and two filtered stations for children may sign up at the reference desk.

The 3,800-square-foot branch at 713 Eighth Ave. S. is the 16th

project completed under the 1998 "Libraries for All" voter-approved building program.

The Branch Library is part of International District Village Square II, a five-story complex, located between South Lane and Dearborn streets and Seventh and Eighth Avenues South. The architect was Miller Hayashi Architects. Cope Construction Co. was the contractor.

During "Hopes and Dreams" Branch meetings, people from the neighborhood had a chance to express their needs and wishes.

"One patron specifically wanted the red and green switch (for occupied and unoccupied) on the bathroom doors," David Kunselman, the Library's Project Manager said.

The public space is divided by curved bookshelves, creating a playful floor plan. A dropped, basket weave ceiling of pressed straw board creates atmosphere, while not taking away from the "breathing space".

The glass façade, sandblasted with the word "library" in different languages, has the same function and effect as a retail store window. Looking in from the outside, you're drawn in. The bright red northern wall complements apple green, the decorator's color of choice.

Hong-Kong born, San Francisco-based artist, writer and designer, Rene Yung created a series of art works out of close to 200 teacups donated by members of the community.

"'Wellspring' draws from the idea of essential nourishment represented by the library and its community. The cup is a simple but potent symbol across cultures because it is a vessel that brings the primal substance –water– to our lips."

Yung embedded some of the cups in resin; the thus created blocks are on display on shelves, between books. Other cups stand on shelves sandwiched between glass panes, which are sandblasted with captured quotes in different languages. The majority of the cups, 120 total, is shown on the red wall. Mounted on small wooden blocks the cups create lines of longitude; the resulting oval shape resembles a global map.

Patrons, most likely people whose cups are part of the art work, lined up to make photos of each other in front of the red wall; continuing their story line. (Look out for more on Rene Yung's fascinating projects in and around Seattle, in the July 6 issue of the International Examiner.)

Saturday June 11, 2005, was a day of "firsts". Many people made their first visit to A Public Library, and for most everyone this marked a first visit to the first Seattle Public Library in SOJA (if New York can have SOHO (south of Houston, Seattle can have SOJA (south of Jackson)).

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