



Libraries through the lens

Le cadeau: Bibliotheque Václav Havel, Paris

TOO often post-industrial legacies can leave areas unloved and struggling for an identity, and this was the case for our latest Libraries through the lens.

Photographer and librarian Thomas Guagnard explains that the the Halle Pajol in working class Parisian suburb La Chapelle was a former shipping yard for French Railways up until the 1970s. However, once it was no longer needed for its original use the hall fell victim to a string of failed redevelopments. That was the case until 2013, when a cultural and social complex opened (including Bibliotheque Václav Havel), filling a void for the local community.

Following a community consultation “the response from what was already one of the most diverse (and poorest) neighbourhoods in the city came loud and clear: they needed affordable short-term housing, communal spaces, and a library,” says Thomas. “The mandate to transform the

site was awarded to architect Françoise-Hélène Jourda, a specialist in sustainable architecture. Inserting itself under the preserved steel structure of the 1926 hall, her new addition made extensive use of wood as the main construction materials. Solar panels on the roof generate more power than the building needs, and turns the site into France’s largest urban solar farm.”

But the story of regeneration stretches beyond the physical realm into social cohesion. Thomas says: “Named after Czech writer and dissident Václav Havel, the library quickly became one of the most heavily used spaces in the complex. Collections and activities are directly aimed at engaging the multicultural youth and young adults of the neighbourhood, which includes a large migrant population. The emergence of Europe’s refugee crisis following the war in Syria has increased pressure on this critical piece of social infrastructure. Acts of violence against staff and patrons pushed the

library to the brink of closing.

“Recognising the importance of the library in this fragile context, the city worked to find solutions, increased staff and added a mediator position to ease tensions.

Admirably, library personnel kept providing services to all patrons throughout this difficult time, earning them respect and recognition from the community.

“In July 2018, representatives from many under-served groups gathered in front of the library for an afternoon of celebration and gratitude. They presented the library with a photograph by Stéphan Zaubitzer, titled “Le cadeau”, the gift. On the picture, the library serves as a background for a joyous gathering of a diverse group of people engaged in their activities. A sound recording collecting oral histories from members of the community, completes the photograph.”

An extended version of this contribution appears on the blog libraryplanet.net, a “crowdsourced travel guide for libraries”.