



Library podcast

Central Library Audio Tour

Welcome to The Seattle Public Library's Central Library, in downtown Seattle. I'm Marcellus Turner, chief librarian and executive director. This location—between fourth and fifth avenues and Madison and Spring streets—has been the site of Seattle's main Library since 1906.

The first Beaux Arts Style Library built here was funded by a donation from Andrew Carnegie, after a mansion at this location burned down in 1901. At the time, Andrew Carnegie donated to communities all over the country to help build libraries. Six branches of The Seattle Public Library are still in their original Carnegie buildings.

The original building was demolished and replaced with a five-story building in 1960. The modern, "international-style" building had the first escalator west of the Mississippi. That building was torn down in 2001 to make way for the new Central Library building.

The current Central Library opened on May 23, 2004, with more than 25,000 people touring the building that day.

The Central Library quickly became the city's newest icon and a must-see destination in Seattle.

The glass and steel structure was designed by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture in the Netherlands, in collaboration with Seattle-based LMN Architects.

Pritzker-prize-winning Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and Seattle native Joshua Prince-Ramus were the principal designers. During design and construction, there was a commitment to incorporate green and sustainable features. For example, all irrigation for the landscaping is provided by rainwater collected from a 40,000-gallon tank located outside the building. The Central Library was awarded a LEED Silver rating by The Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design.

Outside the fourth avenue entrance, you can see the "Fountain of Wisdom" designed by the late George Tsutakawa and originally installed outside the previous building at this location. This marks the Library as a place where ideas flow and a traveler can be refreshed by wisdom.

Just inside the fourth avenue entrance, you can look above and see a portion of our automated materials handling system. When books and other materials are placed in our book returns at the Central Library, a conveyor belt moves them to our automatic materials handling system, which is located in a staff area on level two. Every item in our collection has a radio frequency

identification—or RFID—tag on it. This means that the automated system can automatically sort materials into bins to be returned to the correct library branch. The system processes about fifteen-thousand items every day, and our delivery trucks distribute materials to our twenty-seven Library locations seven days per week.

The floor immediately to the right inside the Central Library's fourth avenue entrance is a piece of artwork created by Ann Hamilton. The 7,200 square foot handcrafted maple wood floor has 556 lines of raised words in 11 languages. These are the first sentences of books from our world languages collection in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Spanish and Vietnamese. The words are inverted as they would be in a traditional printing method invented in the fourteenth century. Hamilton intends to invoke the tactile nature of reading with the raised surface, which can be read, or experienced through touch.

Follow the floor straight back past the bright yellow escalator to browse our world languages collection or visit our Library Equal Access Program—The LEAP Lab, just past the restrooms on your left. On your way back, you can browse our Peak Picks display where you will find best-sellers and other popular books available with no wait.

Find out what's on our Peak Picks shelves at www.spl.org/peakpicks

You can find materials in dozens of languages as well as resources to help you learn English here in the World Languages department. You can also ask staff at the desk to your right for help finding language resources or connecting to other services. Our Community Resource Specialist is available in this area during drop-in hours to help people connect to housing resources and social services. We also have courtesy phones here for patrons to make free local calls.

The Library Equal Access Program—or LEAP—coordinates accessible Library programs, services and assistive resources. We also offer accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act. In the LEAP lab, we have staff who know American Sign Language and can help our patrons use assistive technologies and access Library resources. Some of the technology we use in the LEAP lab includes technology for low vision patrons, and screen reading software for blind patrons. All of our branches have accessibility toolkits with a variety of magnifiers and writing guides to use in the Library.

Learn more about LEAP at www.spl.org/LEAP

The SirsiDynix Gallery—tucked away behind the auditorium -- can be used for small events, exhibits and receptions. You can find the artwork “Northwest Screen” by James H. Fitzgerald and Margaret Tompkins there. This screen is 8 feet tall by 27 feet long and is made of bronze, enamel and brass on colored glass. It features imagery from the Puget Sound area. It was commissioned for the 1960 opening of the previous Central Library and placed in storage while the new building was constructed. When all but the brass uprights were destroyed in a fire, the artists worked nonstop for weeks to recreate it before the 1960 opening. You can also find the three dedication plaques for the Library buildings built on this site in the SirsiDynix gallery.

The Faye G. Allen Children's Center is on the left as you enter from Fourth avenue. This 15,000 square foot space is for kids and their caregivers to browse books, use our games and puzzles, or attend story times and other programs for kids. A glass wall etched with the word 'children' separates the area from the fourth avenue lobby. The floor of the children's center is made from bamboo—a more environmentally friendly flooring than wood. There are also areas of bright yellow and pink rubber flooring for kids to play and read.

The computers in this area offer filtered internet access, and there are also iPads available for kids and their caregivers to use. The colorful textile artworks by local artist Mandy Greer on the walls represent folk tales: Babe the Blue Ox, The Phoenix Fairy (which is a bright red peacock perched on a branch), and The Magic Grove (which a green branch blooming with red flowers). If you look up you will see a light fixture based on an early twentieth century light used in the original Central Library.

The Anne Marie Gault story room is behind the honey-comb-like wall below the digital screen, and can seat close to 100 youngsters for our fun, interactive story times. We offer story time at all of our 27 Library locations, for kids from birth to preschool age to engage with stories and develop language and learning skills. We offer story time in multiple languages at some of our locations.

To learn more about our programs for kids and families, visit www.spl.org/kids.

The Microsoft Auditorium on level one can seat up to 275 people, and an additional 100 in the upper area when the partition is open. This space is available for organizations to rent for presentations, meetings and conferences. We also offer free Library programs in the auditorium, including author readings, panel discussions on current events, Thrilling Tales: a story time for grownups, and a variety of musical performances. You can find hundreds of free Library events each month at www.spl.org/calendar.

The Microsoft Auditorium features a high ceiling, raised auditorium-style seating with green chairs, an audio booth for our AV and lighting technicians, and a screen that we can lower for videos and presentations. There is also a piano available for musical performances. ADA accessible seating is available in the front row. We can provide a sign language interpreter, assistive listening system or guided assistance at our programs with one week notice.

To learn more about our meeting rooms and event facilities, visit www.spl.org/meetingrooms

Welcome to the Norcliffe Foundation Living Room on level three. This open room is a welcoming public space in a part of downtown Seattle that has few public spaces. Level three has comfortable seating areas with plenty of electrical outlets to charge your devices. The indoor garden and nature-themed carpet, along with the sunlight that filters through the diamond-patterned windows, give this room an outdoorsy feel. From the middle of the room you can look up for an interior view of the upper levels of the building.

Our Reader Services librarians are available in the Norcliffe Foundation Living Room on level three to help adults find great books to read. You can ask our librarians for reading suggestions or find out how to use our Your Next 5 books recommendation system. We keep

new fiction in the Maria Lee Koh and Family Fiction Collection located on this floor, as well as nonfiction books, DVDs, and a variety of newspapers and magazines. The bulk of our nonfiction collection at the Central Library is housed in the Books Spiral on levels six through nine.

You will find the FriendShop near the fifth avenue entrance. This gift shop is operated by the Friends of The Seattle Public Library, a nonprofit grassroots organization that supports and promotes our work. Sales at the FriendShop help support Library programs. You can find unique items by Northwest artists here, including jewelry, journals and cards. You can also purchase used books that have been donated to the Friends, who also host annual book sales to help support the Library. The gift shop uses compact shelving, so the store closes into a cube and locks up when the shop is closed.

Next to the Friendshop is Chocolati café, where you can get chocolates and other treats, as well as a variety of coffees, teas and chocolate drinks. You are welcome to eat in the café seating area, and you can take drinks with lids throughout the building.

The Starbucks Teen Center is the area with an orange floor. This area is reserved for young people to use computers and the internet, study, play games or just hang out. We offer programs for teens throughout the year, including teen boredom busters, gaming, Summer of Learning, and digital learning workshops. To learn more about our programs for teens, visit www.spl.org/teens

Level four of the Central Library is known as “the red floor” for the deep shades of red of the curved walls of the hallway, and the stairs leading down to level three and up to level five. 13 shades of red and pink are used on these surfaces, and this hallway is a popular spot for photography. This level houses meeting rooms and computer labs, which are available for public rental when not in use for Library events. Our meeting rooms can be rented for a variety of events, like classes, presentations and parties. In contrast to the red hallway, the meeting rooms are painted calm, neutral colors. The text by the meeting room doors is taken from ‘Robert’s Rules of Order,’ the most widely used manual of parliamentary procedure in the United States. In addition to the meeting rooms on this level, we have several small meeting rooms available for public rental on levels five through nine.

If you turn left after coming up the red stairs from level three, you will find a window in the wall where you can view Tony Oursler’s video sculptures from behind. Just beyond that is a screened window with a view over the Living Room on level three. The hallway on level four forms a loop, so you can walk all the way around and end up back where you started.

Level five of the Central Library is the Charles Simonyi Mixing Chamber, where you can find most of the public computers in the building, as well as printing and copying machines. Architect Rem Koolhaas envisioned this level as a trading floor for information, where Library staff and patrons “mix” to find answers to information needs. Behind the wall, our Quick Information Center staff answer phone calls and find information for patrons. This service has been available since 1976, and staff now also respond to reference questions by email and chat. You can submit your questions and comments at www.spl.org/ask

Aluminum floors are used on this floor and other areas of the building to signify technology. The aluminum panels are removable to provide easy access to cables and wiring, so that we can quickly update systems to the latest technology.

The George Legrady artwork behind the Mixing Chamber desk rotates through the four digital artworks of “Making Visible the Invisible: What the Community is Reading. The digital art pieces display materials that are being checked out by Library patrons. “Vital Statistics” displays a running total of items checked out in different categories, as large numbers on the screen. “Floating Titles” shows the titles checked out in the past hour. The titles move across the screen from right to left, with items with lower Dewey Decimal numbers near the top. In “Dewey Dot Matrix Rain,” titles without Dewey classifications—such as fiction books-- float down the screen like falling rain, while those with Dewey Decimal numbers pop up under their classification. “Keyword Map Attack” positions color-coded keywords for titles checked out by the average of their Dewey subcategories, with white lines connecting keywords to their classifications.

You can also find the painting “Guardian” by Frank Okada on the far side of the black wall of the stairwell. This shows a large field of blue over a smaller field of yellow. The artist donated this work to the Library in honor of his brother, the author John Okada. Both brothers lived in Seattle, and John Okada was the author of the 1957 novel ‘No No Boy’—an account of life in a Japanese American internment camp during World War Two.

You will find another Okada painting on level ten.

In addition to 338 internet-connected computers in the Mixing Chamber and at other locations in the building, free Wi-Fi is available throughout the building and at all 26 Library branches. Some of our locations also offer “FlexTech” lending of tablets and laptops while you are in the Library.

We have online resources that you can use from anywhere with an internet connection if you have a Seattle Public Library card. Visit our website at www.spl.org to access resources to help with your research projects as well as online tools to help you learn a new language, or develop your business and technology skills. Our staff in the Mixing Chamber can help you get started with our online resources and digital media options.

Level ten is the highest public access level of the Central Library. In front of the elevators on level ten you can look over the railing in front of you for a view-from-above of some rooms on level nine. To the left is the Writers’ Room and on the right is the Maritz Map Room. If you look ahead forward diamond-shaped windows, you can catch glimpses of Elliott Bay between buildings, and sometimes watch ferries crossing the water. The view out of the windows to your left faces south, toward Seattle’s stadiums—home to the Seahawks, Sounders, and Mariners-- and the King Street train station with its clock tower. Walk around the corner to your left, and the walkway ends at a dramatic overlook of the interior of the building. From this balcony you can look all the way down to the Living Room space on level three, and view all of the levels in between. Look up to see some of our level eleven headquarters. The building has two staff-only floors: levels two and eleven. From here, you can see that the building is

designed as a series of stacked platforms, each of which serves a unique purpose. These platforms are offset in a way that captures natural light and shade and offers unique views of the city.

If you look closely at the outside of the diamond-shaped windows you will notice hook-like carabiners attached to the steel. These hooks allow window washers to attach themselves to the outside of the building to safely clean the glass surfaces. The brave people who wash our nearly ten thousand windows use mountain-climbing equipment and techniques. On the south-facing windows, a wire mesh allows low winter light to enter, while blocking the high sun in the summer.

The Hugh and Jane Ferguson Seattle Room on level ten at the Central Library houses some of our Special Collections. It includes the Seattle Collection, the Genealogy Collection, Rare Books, the Aviation Collection, and the Albert Balch Autograph Collection. The Seattle Collection includes thousands of unique items from our region's past, such as books, manuscripts, photographs, postcards, yearbooks and even restaurant menus. For example you can find historic high school yearbooks from Seattle's public high schools, amazing materials that document the history of the Pike Place Market, family scrapbooks and photo albums, city directories, and early police and fire reports that paint a fascinating picture of Seattle's early days. We also have information about the history of The Seattle Public Library and the design of this building and other Seattle Public Library buildings. Many items in Special Collections have been digitized and can be viewed online. To learn more about our special collections visit www.spl.org/specialcollections

Above the area with aluminum flooring, on the black wall that houses the stairs, you can see the painting 'Shiva Two' by Frank Okada, who donated the 1972 piece to the Library in honor of his brother, the author, John Okada. The large, abstract painting shows red shapes on a field of blue, with a field of yellow across the bottom.

Around the corner from the Okada painting on the black wall is a white replica of an old library card catalog created by artist Lynne Yamamoto. This was commissioned along with other public art in the building by Seattle's Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs. The artist uses a representation of old library technology to symbolize how access to information has changed over the years.

The Betty Jane Narver Reading Room is the large, open space surrounded by diamond-shaped windows to let in natural light. There are tables with built-in electrical outlets for patrons to sit and work, study, read or enjoy the quiet space. There is seating for up to 400 people in this space, and the area on the aluminum floor near the top of the escalator can be rented for afterhours events.

Betty Jane Narver was a Library trustee during the time when this building was designed and she was a strong advocate for providing a sanctuary for reading. This area is a twenty-first century take on the vaulted reading rooms of the nineteenth century.

The carpet in the reading room is the same the natural pattern found on level three, in a different color palette. The ceiling that separates level ten from our administrative headquarters on level eleven is wrapped in pillows of ripstop nylon—often used for parachutes—This is to absorb sound and keep the space quiet.

The middle section of the Central Library building is the Books Spiral on levels six through nine. These four levels are connected by a gently sloping spiral walkway that allows you to walk all the way through without using stairs, escalators or elevators. These floors are where you can find the bulk of our non-fiction collection, organized according to the Dewey Decimal System. The Dewey classification numbers are shown in white on the black, rubber walkways of the spiral. Before finalizing the spiral, the design team built three full-scale mock-ups to allow everyone from seniors to toddlers to those with disabilities to try moving up and down the gentle slope. Those who tried it were overwhelmingly pleased with the concept and design.

On level nine you will find our genealogy collection, which is the largest public collection for family history and genealogical research in the Pacific Northwest. Look through our family name card catalog to find information about family names, or schedule a free appointment with one of our genealogy librarians to get help with research. We also have free access to online genealogy resources. Learn more about our genealogy services and resources at www.spl.org/genealogy

Level nine also houses more of our nonfiction collection, including biographies and history books. Across from the elevators is the Maritz Map Room, with a series of flat files holding over 50,000 maps and over 100 current and historical atlases. On the wall inside the map room, you can find the “Bibliotopia” collage by artist Deborah Faye Lawrence. We also have about 700 current, circulating sheet maps available just outside the map room, including National Geographic, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and travel maps.

To the left of the map room, across from the elevators on level nine is the Eulalie and Carlo Scandiuzzi Writers’ Room. The Writers’ Room was established to encourage writers to use our collections and to give them a convenient place to work while in the library. Writers can apply to use the room for an established period to work on a writing project.

We host a variety of exhibits related to our collections and the Pacific Northwest in our gallery space on level eight. Past exhibits include:

- Living Cultures: Celebrating the Resilient Indigenous Cultures of the Pacific Northwest
- Experience The Great Seattle Fire in Virtual Reality

Find out about current and past exhibits at www.spl.org/exhibits

Across from the elevators are two music practice rooms. These rooms can be reserved by musicians to practice and compose music. They are equipped with digital keyboards and music stands. Musicians can borrow sheet music from our collection to practice.

The Peter F. Donnelly Arts and Literature collection on level 8 is where you will find nonfiction books related to the arts. We also keep our music CDs and a regional arts collection on level 8.

Level seven houses the Barry A. Ackerly Business Collection. You can request an appointment to meet with one of our business librarians for help with your own business. You can find our Job Resource Center, job and career books, and job search computers on level seven. Nonfiction DVDs and science books are also on level seven. A yellow escalator takes you from level seven to level ten.

On level six—the lowest level of the Books Spiral-- you will find magazines, newspapers, and government publications. You can continue down the books spiral path and take a left for a unique view down to levels three and five. From there, the public stairway is to your left.

Thank you for joining me on this tour of the Central Library. To learn more about the Central Library, visit www.spl.org/central

To learn about our other twenty-six branches, go to www.spl.org/locations I hope you will visit us again soon.