Main library reopens after four-year, $10.5 million renovation

Eilidh Burkett, 4, and Kailey Boudoin, 16 months, look at floor seats, each bearing the flag of a different country in the Story Castle area of the Lafayette Public Library main branch during the branch's reopening Monday in downtown Lafayette. The Story Castle is housed in the children's area, which has an international theme.

Closed for four years, the main library in downtown Lafayette reopened its doors Monday to wide-eyed adults and children who appreciated the $10.5 million transformation of the well-worn 1970s interior into a modern, open space.

The reopening has been a much-anticipated event in the community, with the project involving laborious asbestos removal before the gutting of the building and renovation could begin.

"I thought about coming up here and saying, 'It's about time,'" Lafayette City-Parish President Joey Durel joked before speaking of the community impact of the library, which is open for business on Tuesday.

The $10.5 million renovation is part of a $40 million bond measure approved by voters in 2017.
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2002 that also involved the construction of four new regional libraries. Three of those four branches are now operational, with the final project planned for the Scott area. The three-story downtown library is nearly 66,000 square feet. The renovations were designed by MBSS Group, and Ratcliff Construction was the contractor. The interior design of the building was done by Dewberry.

Durel said some may question a community’s investment in its library system with the advances in technology but the parish’s libraries are used and play an important role in connecting the public to technology services.

“There really is a legitimate digital divide today,” he said. “Everyone has access to the Internet at the library.”

The renovations were a long time coming, said Sona Dombourian, parish libraries director.

Construction of the existing building began in 1970, and it was open to the public in 1973. As the library continued to grow, economic challenges made it difficult to do any renovations or updates to the building while it was heavily used by the public, Dombourian said.

“This building stood for over 40 years without a major renovation,” she said.

Before visitors walked through the doors for the first time, she warned them that they wouldn’t be walking into the same building.

“The inside is completely different from what you’ve seen in the last 40 years,” she said.

Four-year-old Eilidh Burkett had the reaction of most who attended the library’s reopening Monday morning: “Whoa!”

Gone are the dark stone floors and wooden staircase in the first-floor lobby. The entrance of the building is more defined now and was relocated to face Congress and Lafayette streets. Two concrete book spines adorn both sides of the entrance, ushering visitors into a lobby with tall ceilings and a wide corridor that leads to a glass feature wall. The children’s section remains on the first floor but is completely revamped with lots of open space and an international theme.

Open floor plans make collections on the second and third floor more accessible. Large meeting rooms, conference rooms and study rooms also are available throughout the building.

Brother and sister Adam and Sara Ben Hmida cut the ribbon on the children’s section, which features a special entrance painted to look like a bridge that transports the tiny patrons into an international village.

The two are frequent visitors to the downtown branch, which was relocated to Jefferson Street during the renovations, and they don’t quite remember what the former building looked like.

“This looks really nice. They have a lot of technology,” said Adam, 11.

“I really like the international theme,” said Sara, 8.

The two said they planned to spend more time this summer at the branch exploring the new building.

Sara said she most looked forward to discovering “everything” about the library.

Within the children’s section, there’s a separate story castle area designed to fuel children’s imaginations, with a wooden moat as part of the entrance. Chandeliers hang from within the story castle. Eilidh and other children hopped on the seat pads that dotted the floor. Each pad held a different country’s flag.

“It’s cool,” Eilidh said in approval.

Teens have an equally “cool” section with their own computer stations, a conference room and seating areas that include flat, fabric hammock-type chairs that some adults didn’t quite trust until some visiting teens tested them out first.

On the second floor, one of the few things that may be familiar to patrons is the large mural that was on the wall behind the former help desk area. The second floor has a more open floor plan and is home to the fiction collection, as well as audiobooks, music and movies. Large meeting rooms, conference rooms and study rooms also are located on the second floor.

Dombourian said the third floor, prior to the renovation, had more than 21,000 square feet and was used for storage and office space.

Now, the third floor is open to the public and holds the reference section and the library’s genealogy collection, as well as a maker space and tech lab. The lab area has special equipment such as a 3-D printers, a laser cutter and engraver, a sewing machine, a kit to learn circuitry and Lego Mindstorms robot-building kits. There’s also an area for knitting and crocheting.

The genealogy section also features a separate genealogy meeting room. The Lafayette Genealogy Society, which previously met at the downtown branch, offers monthly workshops for those interested in researching family history.

“This is more space for us, and we now have a nice meeting room,” said Brenda Thibodeaux, past president of the Lafayette Genealogy Society.