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During 2003, I was in the fortunate position to visit the city of Chicago as participant in the South African Library Leadership Project (SALLP). The aim of the project, a partnership between the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) and the Mortenson Centre for International Library Programmes and funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation, is to develop leadership qualities of current and future managers of library services. The programme was run over a period of six weeks and included lectures, presentations as well as visits to various institutions that included the Chicago Public Library. Although I spent only three days at the library, it had a lasting impression on me.

### Chicago

Say the word Chicago, and certain images come to mind, such as gangsters, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, Chicago Bulls, et cetera. The city of Chicago is much more than this though. It is the third largest city in the United States of America (USA) and is located in the state of Illinois.

Inhabited by more than three million people it is among the world's leading industrial and transport centres. It is also known as the Windy City. It has the world's busiest airport, O'Hare Airport and has some of the most prominent architectural structures of the twentieth century, including the tallest building in the USA, the Sears Tower which has 110 storeys. There is also an elevated railway system in downtown Chicago, known as The Loop, where the train runs in a loop above the streets of the city. Michigan Avenue, north of the Chicago River, is known as the Magnificent Mile because of its stores, restaurants and hotels and for those who love to shop one could not wish for a better street.

The world's first nuclear reaction was also set off at the University of Chicago in 1942. During the 1920s Chicago became notorious for its gangsters and their activities, including the antics of Al Capone.

Chicago has been home to famous writers, including Upton Sinclair, Saul Bellow, Gwendolyn Brooks and poet Carl Sandburg. It also boasts numerous theatres, museums and art institutes.

### Chicago Public Library

The Chicago Public Library consists of the main library, the Harold Washington Library Centre, as well as 78 branches.



*The Chicago skyline of famous buildings such as the Sears Tower (centre) which is the tallest building in the USA, rising to 110 storeys*

The first Chicago Public Library was opened on 1 January 1873 and was housed in a structure that used to be a water storage tank. It contained 3 157 volumes. This building was erected as a direct result of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 that destroyed most of the city. The author, Thomas Hughes then led a drive to collect books from the United Kingdom which eventually totalled 8 000 titles and this collection was the beginning of the Chicago Public Library. On 1 May 1874, circulation services began and the first book issued was that by Thomas Hughes, **Tom Brown's school days**.

In the beginning the library moved from location to location but on 11 October 1897, the Chicago Central Library, located on Michigan Avenue, opened its doors and a permanent home for the library was finally realised. In January 1904, the first branch library was opened.

### The Harold Washington Library Centre

When one first enters the library one cannot believe that this is a public library. It is reminiscent of an academic library in size, collection and services. The library, of neo-classical design, was opened on 7 October 1991. The design was chosen from entries in a design competition held in June 1988. The library measures 756 640 square feet and

was listed in **The Guinness book of records** as the largest public library building in the world.

The library is named after Harold Washington, the 42nd mayor of Chicago and the first African-American to hold this post. We were informed that the library area has seen some revival of late.

The Harold Washington Library Centre consists of 11 levels that are connected by elevators and escalators except for the top floor which houses the administration block. Computers on every floor are available to the public, except for the lower level, lobby and administration block.

An auditorium that seats 385 people is situated on the lower level of the library as well as an exhibition hall, a video theatre and meeting rooms. A work of art entitled **Du Sable's Journey** that traces the water routes travelled by Chicago's first settler Jean Baptiste Du Sable, adorns the floor of the lower level. The quotations that circle the map were taken from Harold Washington's first and second inaugural speeches.

The entrance hall comprises the entire first floor and contains an information desk and the Media Express, a collection of videos, audiobooks, 16mm films and sound effects. There is also a mural that depicts events in the life of Harold Washington.

The second floor walkway contains



Clockwise from top left:

The imposing entrance hall of the Harold Washington Library Centre

Computers on every floor are available to the public

Artwork entitled **Du Sable's Journey**, on the floor of the lower level depicting routes taken by Chicago's first settler with quotes from Harold Washington's inaugural speeches

A painting by Filemón Santiago in the East Wall main reading room of the Rudy Lozano Branch Library, which is a narrative depiction of 'humanity dreaming of the liberation of its spirit'

**Book a flight** display in the children's section

The Winter Garden on the ninth floor rises over 100 feet to a skylight on the tenth floor. It can be hired for special events and also houses the Beyond Words Café

Photographs by Rene Schoombee



artwork by emerging and established artists. The Thomas Hughes Children's Library is also found on this floor. An 18 000 square foot library, it stocks more than 120 000 volumes that include works in more than 40 foreign languages, a parenting collection, a reference collection focusing on children's literature, the historical Opie collection on microfiche, and more than 70 periodicals. The children's library also houses Nature Connections, a project funded by the Chicago Community Trust, and provides books, materials and programmes related to natural history and 'connects' the library with events and exhibits in institutions throughout the metropolitan area. There is also a computer centre that consists of catalogues, Internet computers and multimedia computers especially for use by children.

The General Information Services Division (GIS) is based on the third floor. Patrons will find a reference desk, inter-library loan desk, rental typewriters as well as the issue desk on this floor. General newspapers and periodicals, encyclopedias, telephone



*Above: There is a special computer center, on the second floor, which caters for children's needs*



*Left: The parent centre has comfortable seating for families to enjoy the reading experience together*

directories as well as English language directories can be found on this floor.

On the fourth floor one finds the Business/Science/Technology Division (BST) that consists of various centres. The Business Information Centre (BIC) is a collection of career planning, job-hunting and test preparation guides, company information resources, investment tools as well as small business information resources. The Science/Technology Information Centre (STIC) contains health and medical information as well as a complete set of US patents from 1790. The Computer Assisted Reference Centre (CARC) is a fee-based information retrieval service. There is also a periodicals service desk. The Electronic Resource Centre (ERC) is a central search

area for business, science and technology information available in electronic format. The Xerox Copy Centre is fee-based and will expedite your research by locating and copying an article, pages of a book, a patent, or a microform.

The fifth and sixth floors contain social sciences materials. Periodicals and microforms are on the fifth floor and the sixth floor houses the book collection.

The Talking Book Centre is situated on the fifth floor and also allows free public use of computers. Here patrons can use a Kurzweil Personal Reader and an Arkenstone Open Book that converts

written symbols to sound for visually- or reading-impaired patrons. The Government Publishing Department and Municipal Reference Collection are also on this floor. Also on the sixth floor is the Teacher Resource Centre.

The seventh floor houses the Literature and Language Division of approximately 700 000 books as well as more than 1 300 journals. The Literature and Language Information Centre (LLIC) and the Foreign Language Information Centre (FLIC) can be found on this floor. The centre contains material in over 200 languages, 50 language journals and a newspaper collection. It also has a language laboratory, a self-instruction centre for language learning, as well as a Spanish Information Service. A Chicago Authors' Room can also be found on this floor.

The eighth floor houses the Visual and

Performing Arts Division. The Art Information Centre contains over 140 000 volumes including archeology, costume, dance, theatre, radio, television and film. The Picture Collection contains over a million items covering 10 000 subjects. There is also a Chicago Artists' Archive as well as a Music Information Centre. The Listening/Viewing Centre allows for the playback of recorded sound and video formats for research and study purposes.

The ninth floor is largely made up of the Winter Garden. It rises over 100 feet through the tenth floor to a skylight and can be hired for special events. There is also a Special Collection and Preservation Division with books, pamphlets, photographs, artifacts, art work and archive materials on the civil War, Chicago Theatre, Chicago Neighbourhood History, Harold Washington, Chicago authors and publications and Chicago Public Library Archives. The Beyond Words Café is also on this floor.

### Other libraries

During my stay I also visited a few branches of the Chicago Public Library. I found Chicago very much a divided city, unlike cities in South Africa where there is more integration. Chinatown is very distinct from the Hispanic sector. Each ethnic group is served by a library that caters for their specific needs.

The Chicago Bee Branch, the Near North Branch, as well as the Austin Branch largely cater for African Americans, while the Lozano Branch caters for Hispanic patrons and the Chinatown Branch caters for the Chinese community. Each library has a different design and feel and is a true reflection of their community.

The friendly and efficient staff of the Chicago Public Library as well as its affiliated libraries extended a warm welcome to the South Africans. They were very keen to know about South Africa and especially its libraries.

During our stay we also managed to visit the offices of the American Library Association (ALA) although we were disappointed to discover that this was not the office from where the Association's magnificent library products were distributed.

Some time was also spent sightseeing this magnificent city but there was really not enough time to do it justice. However, the city made such an impression on me that I want to go back and experience more.