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PROVIDENCE LIBRARY | A NEW CHAPTER



JOURNAL FILES/SANDOR BODO

It's becoming a place to party



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL/MARY MURPHY

The Washington Street entrance of the Providence Public Library will be reopened when the building's rooms are booked for receptions and other functions. Above, the top of an exterior column. Below, these stairs are part of the charm of the library.

By **JOHN HILL**
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PROVIDENCE

The Providence Public Library is hoping to add something new to its collections next year. There'll be fiction, nonfiction and ... nuptials.

Along with computer stations, the DVD and book stacks, the library is nearing the end of a \$4-million renovation that will refurbish the Grand Hall, add an inner courtyard, and upgrade meeting rooms as part of an effort to rent out event space in the opulent Venetian Renaissance-style landmark.

When the work is done at the end of December, and those areas open to wedding parties and corporate meetings, the Providence Public Library will join an increasing number of big-city libraries that are trying to turn their ornate early 1900s buildings into 21st-century moneymakers.

Library Director Dale Thompson said if those parts of the library can be made to pay, the institution will be more able to keep lending books for free in the rest of the place.

The Washington Street entrance, with its curved stairs, will be reopened for those special events. Guests will be able to pass through into the restored Grand Hall leading to where the book checkout used to be. Once there, they will look down into an interior courtyard with a gleaming floor and decorated with planters where, in a past life, library patrons sat and read newspapers and magazines.

Officials hopeful
weddings,
corporate events
will help cover
library's expenses



JOURNAL FILES

The Rhode Island Room, historically a reference and reading area, will be restored for meetings, and the Ship Room will be turned into an exhibition space, allowing the library to display items from its collections that have been stored or infrequently viewed.

When the areas off the main sections are not being used for functions, they will be open to the library's reading public, Thompson said.

"We're not closing anything off," she said. "We want to open the building up, so people can see the building."

And they want people in the building. In an age when readers are able to buy a book online while they're stuck in traffic on the 6-10 connector, and libraries are expanding their own e-book lending programs, Thompson said readers have fewer reasons to come to the building. Booking corporate and social events increases revenue and gives the library a chance to show itself off, to remind the community that it's still there.

The inspiration for the effort was the Boston Public Library, which has been booking corporate events and weddings for more than a decade. Boston library events manager Emily Tenney said that besides the income — some room fees run \$6,000, not counting hourly charges — event guests invariably wind up gazing at the ceilings and walls and saying, "I never knew this was here."

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LIBRARY

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Preparing for Parties

“It happens every time,” she said.

Tenney said the library’s main line was corporate events until 2008, when the “Sex and the City” movie came out and Carrie Bradshaw got married in the New York Public Library.

“That really was our tipping point,” Tenney said. “That was the point where we really started to get the phone calls.”

To see it all you have to do is go to the Boston library’s website. The 40-page color brochure, more like a magazine, is jammed with advertisements from hotels, florists, photographers, guitarists and harpists.

That was the example Providence library officials say they looked to as they confronted an increasingly austere 21st century.

In the last three years, revenue has become an pressing issue. In 2009 the City of Providence withdrew the \$3.5 million it contributed to the library’s operations and instead used it to take over the library’s nine local branches, which were set to close.

Though the main building at Empire and Washington streets is called the Providence Public Library, it’s owned by a private foundation, not the city. Over the past four years, its operating budget has dwindled from almost \$10 million to about \$3.5 million. Thompson said the library hopes the social event side business will be a way to recoup some of those losses.

Weddings are the big-ticket item for the kind of venues the library hopes to join. Russell Morin, of Morin Fine Catering, the library’s caterer, said the target audience wouldn’t be weddings at country clubs, but high-society affairs in places such as Newport.

Elizabeth Lutz, a Morin wedding planner who has been marketing the library to potential brides, said there are always women looking for the newest big thing. The airy ornate halls and polished stone columns of the library fit that bill, she said.

The library was built in 1900, at a time when Providence was an economic powerhouse, home to some of the leading manufacturers of the age. The library was designed to announce that.

Sheathed in granite, it was decorated in the style of the Venetian Renaissance. Its orange-to-gold Siena marble walls glow with a sunset-like hue. The columns that support the ceilings are topped with cherubs. The iron banisters on the stairs are supported by intertwined vines.

Morin Fine Catering handles similar events for the New Bedford Whaling Museum, Sakonnet Vineyards and the Stone House in Little Compton. Morin said a distinctive venue such as the library could charge around \$100 to \$150 per person for a wedding. At \$150 per person, assuming 50 weddings with 200

guests each — and Morin said once things get rolling, a wedding a week isn’t an unreasonable goal — that could generate about \$1.5 million a year.

Thompson said the plan is not limited to weddings. The library is a block and a half from the convention center, and she said the library will work with convention planners there. Morin said trade associations and Rhode Island-based companies that hold meetings with employees from far-flung operations are another marketing target.

Opening the building to receptions and meetings may be new in Providence, but from the Boston Public Library to the Richard Nixon presidential library in Yorba Linda, Calif., others have already gotten into the act.



RENDERING COURTESY DESIGNLAB ARCHITECTS

An artist rendering of what the library’s Rhode Island Room will look like when renovations are complete at the end of December. The room will be available for receptions and other functions.



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL/MARY MURPHY

Dimeo Corp. workers Robert Loffredo, left, and Joshua Hoyt wrap the mahogany molding that they will replace in a doorway off of the Trustees Room.



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CRAIG BLANKENHORN/THE KOBAL COLL/CRAIG BLANKENHORN

Jonathan Movroydis, director of communications at the Nixon Presidential Library & Museum, said the library sort of stumbled into it. In 2010 the library opened a new exhibit and its centerpiece was a duplicate of the White House East Room, home to state dinners and other presidential social events, including the 1971 wedding of Nixon’s daughter Tricia and Edward Cox.

The intent was to use the room for the library’s own events, Movroydis said, but then people began to call about renting it out for weddings. Now, marketing the room and the library grounds for social and business events is part of the library’s overall business plan.

Todd Boyer, events director at the Kansas City Public Library, said wedding receptions and business meetings can bring a library added income but not enough to replace local or state support. If an institution goes the event rental route, he said it needs to make the effort part of a larger marketing effort to sell the library.

“It’s a way of bringing in people who might not have another reason to come to the library,” he said.

Thompson said that was part of Providence’ strategy as well.

“Technology can be isolating. We need places where people can come together and provide nourishment, energy to the life of the mind,” she said. “We’re interested in making sure there is a place like that in the community. And by showing it to them in a different way, [Boyer] said they might be more likely to come back.”

Public library on Empire Street open

Although the Providence Community Libraries are closed this week due to a budget shortfall, the Providence Public Library at 150 Empire St. downtown is open on its regular schedule, the library announced Monday.

The Providence Community Library System, which operates nine neighborhood libraries, announced in July that it would close from today through Saturday to make up for a \$205,000 cut in city funding.

Regular hours will resume on Monday.