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### **CULTURE AND EDUCATION IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

the case of an experiment in Argentina through the Mariano Moreno Cultural Association

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#### **Metropolitan Libraries Section of IFLA (formerly INTAMEL – the International Association of Metropolitan Libraries, a Round Table of IFLA)**

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The Mariano Moreno Cultural Association is a non-profit private organization that defines a community policy for the development of public cultural and educational services through the Mariano Moreno Public Library and Cultural Complex, as a pilot project of demonstration devoted to permanent information, continued education and lifelong learning.

It is located in Bernal, a city of 150,000 inhabitants and a part of southern Greater Buenos Aires City. It has an urban, commercial and industrial topography.

The Library was founded in 1932 by a group of 16 neighbours — workers and students — whose will and determination made possible the inception of the institution.

The Association owns and runs the public library services for the whole community,

reaching neighbouring counties as well. Its management is entirely independent of local, state and national governments.

In fact, the origin of popular libraries in Argentina goes back to the late 19th century. President Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, formerly Ambassador to the United States, sent a bill to the National Congress to give rise and to enable small and scattered libraries with community participation and initial support for the improvement of services, as free reading tools aiding the start of the public school system. Said bill was enacted on September 23, 1870, under number 419 creating the National Commission for the Protection of Popular Libraries. The Commission was responsible for the promotion, official recognition, inspection and 50% funding of popular libraries established under its protection.

After his experience in the United States, Sarmiento learnt that people could benefit from having access to well-resourced libraries as an opportunity to develop well-informed citizenship and to preserve free thinking and democracy. He thought about the needs of distant towns, the strong importance of reading good books in Spanish literature, the translations of renowned foreign authors, and the future demands for knowledge in Argentina. By 1876 200 libraries worked under the auspices of the library act and during more than a century popular libraries have been receiving very scanty funding from government sources. It means that different governments in the political arena did not give a concerned priority to back this type of institution, and community growth demanding other basic services became a barrier to developing a well-organized public library system with improved human and economic resources and modern information technologies.

As I said before, the Mariano Moreno Library was founded in 1932. In 1959, under the pressure of community demands and a very old and small building, a party of 1000 neighbours granted one square metre of land, thus allowing the challenging steps to purchase a central and best-suited vacant lot, where the modern pilot building of the library and cultural complex stands today after long-term community efforts.

With a decision for innovative professional ideas, linking library services with cultural and non-formal educational activities, the library building was constructed under a model design selected in a public architectural contest. Comparative studies of needs and facilities were initially carried out in the United States and Canada as a new community challenge, which included community socio-cultural and educational diagnosis performed with university research and the economic aid of UNESCO. Community leadership and huge efforts were successful in getting the endorsements of the National Ministries of Education, Social Affairs and Interior — later on transferred to the Ministry of Economy — which allowed the financing of seven years of construction and equipment from 1973 to 1980 and, later, functional financing through government contributions until 1996. Also, further economic aid arrived from citizens, patrons, industries, businesses, foundations and other institutional sources. Therefore, in 1980 onwards the six-floor building with a total of 4650 square metres was opened to increasing free public use. To these ends a tight financial administration and teamwork of different professions, convened by the Cultural Association Board heads, was performed under a number of normative policies. Thus, the community of Bernal and neighbouring areas had full opportunities for

reading and general information searching as well as a strong programme of non-formal education and many cultural activities of its own and from other sources, local, national and international.

Today the library's holdings amount to 60,000 volumes of books, 1500 cultural and educational videos and other special formats, and including a very complete reference collection. Library staff training was accomplished in 1992 in order to reach the automation of the catalogues through Microsis software freely supplied by UNESCO. In terms of extension to strengthen library information to public schools through books, videos, and cultural activities, the project pioneered in the country bookmobile services with further design and construction by the National Commission of Popular Libraries. For such a purpose the library building included bookmobile accommodation plus living facilities for special visitors.

As an integrated operative unit, the Cultural Complex today offers many activities with community participation in about 20 non-formal courses per year, workshops, seminars, lectures, theatre plays, concerts, shows, movies, art and science exhibit areas, AV lab and TV set, a public auditorium with 400 seats, among other facilities. In addition, a public Plaza and green reserve across the library building offers summer activities in the open air, as well as a permanent playground for children and general public recreation. Public learning and use of computing applied services are also established as a permanent activity.

Some projects on-going or to be accomplished by the experimental programme

1. The improvement of public library collections to reach a full planned building capacity of 150,000 books and other items, enhancing investment in modern information equipment and to strengthen the already available reference collections.
2. To enlarge Children and Juvenile collections linked to a number of educational and cultural activities, emphasizing the priority given to book and image-reading projects.
3. To widen the Extension Programme to a number of public schools deprived of school library services, through available bookmobile and other information technologies. Obviously this item is very much attached to the purposes of the previous item.
4. To enhance the current newspaper and journal service with internet access linked to public computers in a comfortable site with the provision of a self-service cafeteria.
5. To strengthen municipal cooperation in library personnel fellowships and contracts, and also in the improvement and maintenance of the Association Plaza. Mural painting contests, open-air chess games, and other cultural activities are held annually in this public facility.
6. To ensure wider information networking with other libraries, implying the operation of a node with the National Library and the National Teachers Library of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, and to continue public training through computer programs and therefore to enhance available resources from the web.

7. To continue daily video recording from selected cultural, educational and scientific programmes using the facilities of decoded production such as that of the Iberoamerican Educational TV Association supplied through an agreement with the Bariloche Foundation and the cooperation of the Government of Spain.

8. To introduce fraternity agreements with advanced public libraries from other countries in order to exchange human resources, information on different available sources, exchange of cultural activities and the professional training of librarians. The first agreement has already been signed with Queens Public Library of New York.

9. To improve the cooperation in arts fields through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which has appointed the Association as a leading regional delegate centre. The NEA has already granted funding for theatre improvement, equipment and other facilities.

10. To design, share and fulfil a postgraduate career programme in education and research for public librarians open to international cooperation as a project with a national university accredited library school.

11. To renew strong leadership to cooperate and give technical assistance for local, state and national public library legislation. The National Library Act of 1986, which the National Congress passed with unanimous approval and its regulation, adopted many ideas and experiences raised by the pilot social laboratory of the public library and cultural complex run by the Mariano Moreno Cultural Association.

12. Permanent training and software updating in all the areas of the institution with special emphasis on technical and administrative improvements. Public library staff training in literacy education extended to library customers.

13. To promote other media delivery and visual facilities such as the public lending of films and videos from the collection granted through an agreement with the National Film Board of Canada, and, in the same manner, to start a wide musical collection of CDs for public hearing and lending.

14. Last but not least, to explore new fund-raising sources from public and private sectors. Budget problems are always critical, particularly with the economic crisis going on in Argentina as a developing and regionally inserted country.

Buenos Aires, August 24, 2004