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Letters from the LCC President

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One of the magnets on our family kitchen fridge - a souvenir from the New York Public Library - shares a quote attributed to Albert Einstein: "The only thing that you absolutely have to know is the location of the library." It's a compelling message. Necessary and indeed foundational knowledge comes in the form of situating the library on the map. Locating the library is the first step to taking the time to visit, opening the door, using the space, and finding ways to answer (and keep asking) questions.



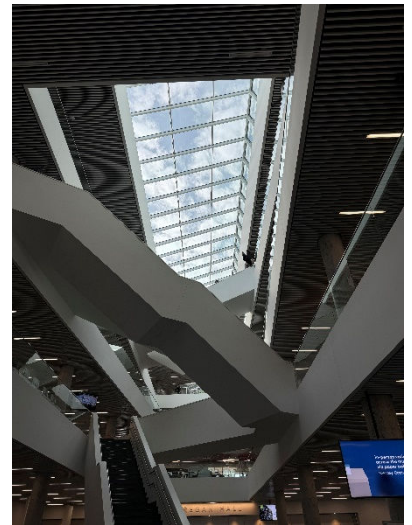
Halifax Central Library.

On our Listen & Learn visit to Nova Scotia earlier this fall, Law Commission Director of Outreach

and Engagement, Brian Peebles, suggested we make a stop at the Halifax Public Library. He didn't know about the magnet and its message. But he did know that I am an avid supporter of public libraries, keen to figure out connections between the LCC's commitment to engagement and the remarkable, wide-ranging, and community-supporting vocation taken on by libraries across Canada. The photos that accompany this letter share the Halifax Public Library with readers and lead to the following reflections on how the Law Commission of Canada might "locate the library".

Perhaps most obviously, reference to the library should invite us to think about books. Visitors to the LCC in Ottawa inevitably comment with enthusiasm on our bookshelves as a central, welcoming feature of our office space. One of our early tasks was to repatriate physical copies of the reports of our predecessors (the Law Reform Commission, 1971-1992, and the Law Commission, 1997-2006). In addition, we began to create a small in-house collection of books to be used on a regular basis by our research students and Fellows. As the shelves fill up with books in which we can literally place bookmarks, we aim to demonstrate – in a practical as well as symbolic way – the central significance of turning to helpful and serious sources in law and law reform.

Of course, libraries are much more than buildings filled with bookshelves. They serve as neighbourhood anchors, school centres, and sites of



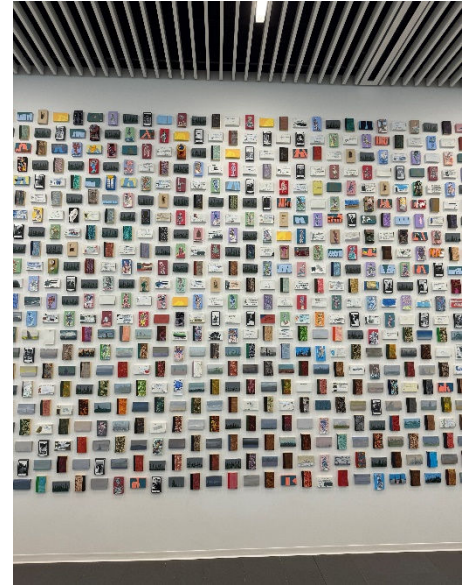
Halifax Central Library interior.



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encounter with people, resources and ideas. Whether their architecture is innovative and inspiring, or in need of renovation or redesign, libraries fill and use their space in a remarkable variety of ways. Display tables invite our attention to selected themes or topics, encouraging unexpected learning and exploration. Driven by their general curiosity or specific research ambitions, visitors can immerse themselves in the stacks or connect to the internet with free Wi-Fi. The children's corner is marked by accessible desks and comfortable cushions, and it fills up on a regular basis with the sound of storytelling. There are always dedicated places for onsite consultation, for collective activities, for borrowing and returning materials. The work of local artists might be displayed; items from current world news might be featured; recommendations for book clubs or films or podcasts might be shared.



Mosaic display inside the library.

What do libraries do? What roles do librarians take on? They act as curators, as guides, as resource people. They serve as liaisons to school learning and as responsive supporters of the cross-generational communities they serve. They welcome newcomers to their adopted neighbourhood, city or country; they encourage exploration of languages, cultures, and the histories and maps of our world. They offer seniors concrete opportunities to keep learning and sharing; they provide literal and metaphorical warmth; and they model creativity and capacity to adapt. In general, they acknowledge and support the incredible breadth and depth of their users' interests, activities, needs, and questions. What impact do libraries have? If their vocation were restricted to lending a set number of books to borrowers each year, we might be tempted to measure that impact by counting the books or coming up with plans to replace them through virtual access to full-text versions. Such a simplistic account would miss all the stuff that also matters. Figuring out the value of libraries requires a comprehensive, complex and indeed never complete appreciation of their reach, projects and promise. It means understanding and trying to articulate on an ongoing basis why it's necessary to know the location of the library.

One of the Law Commission's Advisory Council members recently suggested to me that the LCC could perhaps think of itself as a library. It's a lovely idea, and a fruitful image for our emerging architecture, direction and ambition. What an inspiring aspiration for the Law Commission: to live up to the high standard set, and indeed constantly re-set, by libraries! The LCC might create dedicated library-like spaces for our law reform projects, rotate our collections and collaborations with other institutional legal actors, shine a light on selected themes relevant to law in Canada, support a range of authors and creators in law, share in responding to community justice needs, support ongoing learning about legal traditions and systems, and facilitate connections through law across contexts and generations. We might assist in imagining new designs and functions for fellow libraries, whether literal or metaphorical. And we might insist that our significance and value be measured in imaginative ways attuned to long term investment and consequences that extend beyond today or even tomorrow.

In this season of short days and approaching winter, maybe this letter prompts readers to check whether they know the location of the closest library. It might be time for a visit - to borrow some books, to participate in what's happening, to say hello to who's there, and to reflect on why it matters.