

US library offers glimpse of bookless future

January 3 2014, by Paul J. Weber



A woman points at a computer screen at BiblioTech, a first of its kind digital public library, Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2013, in San Antonio. Bexar County's BiblioTech is the nation's only bookless public library, according to information gathered by the American Library Association, a distinction that has attracted scores of digital bookworms, plus emissaries from as far away as Hong Kong who want to learn about the idea and possibly take it home. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

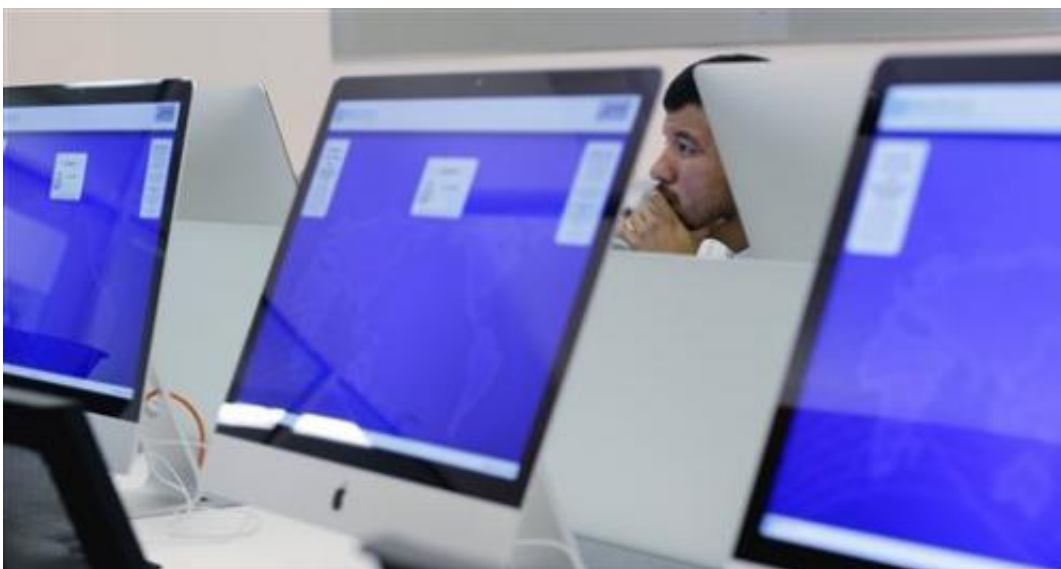
(AP)—The future of the public library looks a lot like an Apple Store. Rows of glossy iMacs and iPads beckon. Hundreds of other tablets stand ready for checkout to anyone with a borrowing card.

This \$2.3 million library in Texas has no actual books. That makes BiblioTech the nation's only bookless public library, a distinction that has attracted people from as far away as Hong Kong who want to learn about the idea and possibly take it home.

All-digital libraries have been on college campuses for years. But Bexar County, which runs no other libraries, made history when it decided to open BiblioTech. It is the first bookless public library system in the country, according to information gathered by the American Library Association.

San Antonio is the nation's seventh-largest city but ranks 60th in literacy, according to census figures. In the early 2000s, community leaders in BiblioTech's neighborhood of low-income apartments and thrift stores complained about not even having a nearby bookstore, said Laura Cole, BiblioTech's project coordinator. A decade later, Cole said, most families in the area still don't have wi-fi.

"How do you advance literacy with so few resources available?" she said.



Juan Castilleja uses a computer at BiblioTech, a first of its kind digital public library, Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2013, in San Antonio. Bexar County's BibiloTech is the nation's only bookless public library. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

Residents are taking advantage now. The library is on pace to surpass 100,000 visitors in its first year. Finding an open iMac among the four dozen at BiblioTech is often difficult after school lets out, and about half of the facility's e-readers are checked out at any given time, each loaded with up to five books.

Head librarian Ashley Elkholf came from a traditional library and recalled the troubles of her old job: misshelved items hopelessly lost in the stacks, pages thoughtlessly ripped out of books and items that went unreturned by patrons who were not intimidated by measly fines and lax enforcement.

But in the nearly four months since BiblioTech opened, Elkholf has yet to lend out one of her pricey tablets and never see it again. The space is also more economical than traditional libraries despite the technology: BiblioTech purchases its 10,000-title digital collection for the same price as physical copies, but the county saved millions on architecture because the building's design didn't need to accommodate printed books.

"If you have bookshelves, you have to structure the building so it can hold all of that weight," Elkholf said.



Patrons use computers at BiblioTech, a first of its kind digital public library, Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2013, in San Antonio. Bexar County's BiblioTech is the nation's only bookless public library, according to information gathered by the American Library Association, a distinction that has attracted scores of digital bookworms, plus emissaries from as far away as Hong Kong who want to learn about the idea and possibly take it home. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

Up the road in Austin, for example, the city is building a downtown library to open in 2016 at a cost of \$120 million. Even a smaller traditional public library that recently opened in nearby Kyle cost that city about \$1 million more than BiblioTech.

On her first visit, 19-year-old Abigail Reyes got a quick tutorial from a librarian on how to search for digital books and check out tablets.

"I kind of miss the books," Reyes said. "I don't like being on the tablets and stuff like that. It hurts my eyes."

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