

Halving opening times at Birmingham's brilliant new library is madness

La plus grande bibliothèque d'Angleterre va fermer le dimanche, pour raison d'économie.

C'est quoi, le message ? Ne vous cultivez pas, ne lisez plus, mais consommez. En latin, avant que Mme Belkacem ne le fasse disparaître, on disait "panem et circences".

The telegraph, 22/4/15

During an after-work trip to the National Gallery at the end of last week, I overheard a fellow visitor commiserate with a guard about how long he had to be on his feet. The guard responded stoically that most days it was no problem standing around for six or seven hours and it was only the late opening on Fridays that tested his physical mettle.

It was a reminder that while I was lucky enough to be able to take advantage of the chance to visit the exhibition at a quieter time that suited me, it was at the cost of someone else's quality of life. As it always is. Life may be infinitely easier now that we live in an 'open all hours' culture in which we expect to be able to access everything from supermarkets to cinemas, tube lines to GPs, at times that suit us i.e. generally outside the hours we work.

But of course, that means the reverse is true for those workers: they must work while everyone is playing. On the plus side, you could say this is part of the bedrock of our service sector society - three quarters of our economy - but also the root of the contrasting malaises of many people working longer, more anti-social hours and zero hours contracts.

This dynamic was thrown into even greater relief with the news that Birmingham's landmark Library, opened less than two years ago to great fanfare and at a cost of 189 million pounds, has this week had its opening hours halved. From last weekend, the library is open for only six hours on Saturdays and is closed completely on Sundays. During the week, it will close at 5pm three days out of five.

• The Library of Birmingham, first look

The council has said that the £1.3 million cuts to the Library are necessary, as the city faces a dire financial situation following budget cuts and a £1.1 billion bill after it lost an equal pay claim brought by female workers, along with reforming a much-criticised child protection department.

But as protestors outside the library this week are arguing, this decision is madness. This is not just about an inconvenience to users, and it should be remembered that while the hours have been halved, so have the number of jobs in the library.

It's a piece of madness because the library was one of the great – and rare – success stories from Birmingham of late. It is not just the biggest public library in the UK and the largest public cultural space in Europe, it is also a massive tourist attraction, enticing 2.4 million visitors last year, more than the British Library. It was the 10th most popular free attraction in the UK last year, and the only one of the 10 outside London.

I admit I had some doubts about the building, particularly as I was a great fan of the old John Madin-designed and much maligned Central Library. The outside gold ocean liner look seemed overly blingy, a weird riposte to the spaceship-like Selfridges across town. The inside, by contrast, was cool and dark and certainly large but with seemingly few desks, or even books on display, didn't necessarily look like it was designed for quiet, contemplative study.

• The most spectacular libraries in the world

Yet, when I went back to see the Gillian Wearing sculpture unveiled last year, it was heartening to see what an undeniable success the Library was. It might not have been quiet but it was certainly throbbing with life, stuffed full of students and gawpers. Birmingham is not a city with obvious charms, but the Library was an attraction everyone could point to. It was the first place I recommended to visit to a friend who moved to the city, and the one she was most impressed with.

At a time when all libraries are under attack with budgetary cuts as people question the need for them, it was heartening that the city with the youngest and most ethnically diverse population in the country had made such a symbol of a temple of learning in a city centre that otherwise had been given over to shopping as the great new religion.

While the Trojan horse conspiracy in some of the city's Muslim schools was proved unfounded, it did reveal a weakness for communities to become isolated and inward looking. The Library felt like a tribute and an invite to all creeds and classes of Brummies, young and old, to come together, in a kind of silence, and share a space that was about opening the mind to new things.

The journalist Caitlin Moran recounted last weekend of returning to her hometown of Wolverhampton and discovering her beloved childhood library stripped to the bone. She rightly argued that the internet could never replace a library because while the former pointed you to what were the most popular things in any subject, a library enshrined the best. The Library of Birmingham enshrined the best of the city. Despite the accent regularly being described as one of the most stupid sounding in the country, here are people clamouring to learn.

• In pictures: the new £188m Library of Birmingham

There is a terrible sense of history itself repeating here. Madin's brutalist design was never finished properly due to budget cuts and was therefore accused of being flawed and unusable and left to fall into disrepair. The success of the

new Library can only be stymied by closing it at the times people often most want to use or visit it.

The timing of this could not be worse with Manchester, laying claim to the crown of second city in the UK, about to open its new flagship arts centre, Home, next week.

Culturally Birmingham may look like it is struggling to compete but it has proved that it can do a lot with very little. The Ikon gallery is a brilliant contemporary art gallery, Graham Vick has created incredible opera productions in disused spaces with legions of volunteers; film festival Flatpack and arts and music weekend Supersonic provide truly independent, original and thought provoking programmes.

The success of all these endeavours is built on the freely given support of Brummies. They should get the library they deserve.