COMMUNITY ANCHOR, COUNCIL SHOP WINDOW: THE MODERN PUBLIC LIBRARY

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Such is the scope and valuation of the public library it has received over 130 descriptors, more than any other public agency or service. Those descriptors are useful prompts to discussion about the role and potential of the modern public library, discussion which is needed as part of the educative process for the community and its decision makers about how libraries have evolved and changed over the last 50 years.

For half of those 50 years, Friends of Mackay Libraries has borne witness to that continuing evolution. However the oldest Friends group in Australia is that of the State Library of South Australia. This was established following a a very well attended public meeting in the Adelaide Town Hall on a cold and wet winter evening in July 1932. That meeting was held to protest the very poor state government funding of the then Public Library of SA, which in that year of 1932 was provided with just 13s 6d to buy books. The Friends of the State Library of SA thus will celebrate its 75th birthday in 2007.

Yet it is really only the last 30 years that has seen the development of Friends groups for local public libraries in Australia, and it is likely that the Friends of Mackay Libraries was among the first ten of them. Through its 25 years of support for Mackay's libraries, it has assisted in their development, been a voice of the community about them, and provided an exemplar for the establishment and continuity of Friends of Libraries groups throughout Queensland and Australia.

Friends of Libraries Australia – although the second national organisation of its type worldwide – is itself less than half the age of the Friends of Mackay Libraries. It is therefore a great privilege to join you in your celebration, and to have the opportunity to reflect on the importance of public libraries to so many in the community, and the challenges we all face as volunteers in supporting them. Thank you for the kind invitation to be with you on this special occasion, an occasion which FOLA is pleased to recognise by placing this address on its website www.fola.org.au.

This address focuses on just two of those 130 descriptors, a list of which is to be found on the FOLA website.[1] The first is the public library as a community anchor; the other is the public library as a council's shop window. They have been chosen because they are primary reasons why a library is the best investment a community and its council can make – for community connection from cradle to grave, or 'womb to tomb' if you prefer, and for the community's awareness and appreciation of progressive local government.

Public libraries as community anchors

The loss of social capital and community and family connection in western society has received considerable attention since the research of American Professor Robert Putnam and others in the 1990s. In response to that loss, Australian local government is being encouraged to become more involved in community capacity building, as evidenced by the federal Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs *Strong and resilient communities awards* for local

government. Friends of Libraries who consider that their libraries are already building stronger communities should consider encouraging their councils to nominate for these awards.[2]

Community capacity building does beg the question of how, and in what places it can occur, and in particular where the whole of a community – from cradle to grave – can connect. Is it the local pub or club? The local football club? Churches ? Schools? Shops? The answer is that all of these places provide opportunities for people to connect, but within fairly narrow ranges.

This point was raised in a paper from Queensland at the Australian and New Zealand library buildings conference held in Adelaide 31 March-1April 2006. The paper was about the emphasis being placed on the development of libraries colocated with other services to capacity build and help sustain areas of rural population decline and in the case of sea and tree change communities, population growth. It quoted from a proposal – which has just been approved – for such a development at a Stonehenge, a small community 150 kilometres south of Longreach.

> At present the only place for social interaction is the hotel which is not a family friendly environment. The establishment of a library and centre that can provide a neutral place for people and families to meet will assist in maintaining the emotional, mental health and well being of the community – especially during times of high stress.[3]

In *The Australian* 31 May 2006 appeared a letter in similar vein to the Stonehenge proposal from a resident of Lockhart River, an Aboriginal community on Cape York. This read in part

> Imagine a town where at night there are no shops open, no cinema or other entertainment options, no sports clubs, gymnasiums or skate parks – nothing for the kids to do. This is Lockhart River, an Aboriginal community on Cape York.
> Recently some community volunteers opened the public library at night for a two week trial. The result was an overwhelming success…
> The library is currently managed part time by a community development officer, but we have no funds to pay for a librarian. If the well meaning public servants who come to Lockhart River for meetings(mainly with other white people) reduced their visits by half and did that work by phone, about $100,000 could be saved annually. This would easily cover the cost of staffing the library for 12 hours each day.
> It is just absurd that, in the current climate of concern for Aboriginal kids, we are unable to fund a simple practical alternative to having them wandering, unsupervised, around the streets at night.

However several things are needed, apart from better hours of opening, if more public libraries are to truly be 'hangouts at the heart of the community' or 'community hubs' as they have also been described. Their buildings need to be

- well signposted
- well signed
- very visible
- provide generous parking, particularly as people stay longer in better libraries
- well located
- spacious
- attractive and welcoming to *all* ages
- able to provide space and time zones for different user cohorts
- have generous display/gallery areas
- provide generous and free internet access
- provide toy libraries
- provide local studies areas
- provide lounge areas, meeting rooms, learning centres, homework centres, JP rooms, Friends of the Library room, and parenting rooms
- provide good refreshment facilities

- provide graphic novels, music, Xboxes, playstations and even arcade games to attract young people
- open seven days a week, most evenings and on most public holidays.

Some of these may appear to be beyond the role or scope of a public library. Yet they already exist in modern libraries. Toy libraries, for example, make great complementary educational sense in public libraries which are increasingly involved in providing bookstart programs to encourage parents to read to babies as a critical aspect of literacy development and parent-child bonding. As another example, new libraries – like the super bookstores – are now incorporating proper coffee shops, sometimes run by local café operators happy to capitalise on the heavy traffic a public library experiences. Indeed, the Geraldton public library in Western Australia has had a coffee shop in it for over 25 years. Useful practical information was provided from New Zealand about this issue at the Adelaide library buildings conference. There is no reason to be coy about asserting that a decent coffee shop should, in 2006, be an integral part of any reasonably large public library. However, as a conference speaker asserted

> Ensure top quality coffee is used by the café. The food also has to be of high quality. A poor quality café product or poor café service reflects on libraries. The café needs to be child friendly. Children and their caregivers are big users.[4]

To emphasise this point, the 2006 New Zealand strategic framework for public libraries quotes a library user from Christchurch

> On Sunday, my husband, son and I went to the library; books for my son, the internet for business purposes for my husband and a reference book for me. We had coffee together while reading magazines. We also bumped into half the neighbourhood. What a fantastic community asset![5]

As another example, libraries are increasingly recognising that they can offer young people a special, but not necessarily a conventional reading, experience and are focusing on them in their spaces, design, resources, services and marketing strategies.

The Mt Barker Community Library in South Australia, for instance, does not only have an excellent toy library for children but is now providing arcade games as an attractor to young people to explore the library's other resources; the City of Christchurch's young people focused New Brighton Library has resulted in less graffiti and vandalism in its low socioeconomic area; and the young people focused Munno Para Shopping Centre Library in South Australia has resulted in a reduction of local problems with young males – they are all good investments by their communities and councils. Communities, local government and public libraries neglect the full range of their young people, indigenous and nonindigenous, at considerable current and potential cost to the community – and to those young people as individuals.

Not all library users are understanding of, or happy about, this evolution of the public library from essentially a book lending and reference information agency to community anchor or community hangout, but it is an evolution which commenced over 50 years ago and will continue. Sometimes older library users at the public consultations normally preceding the planning of a new library will just want in their new library a peaceful and comfortable place with a good book collection on shelves they can easily reach. That is very understandable, but the reality is that the public library must continue to evolve to meet the challenges of its very diverse clientele, a diversity greater than that experienced by any other public agency. The challenge in their design is to accommodate all needs. It is here that Friends of Libraries can help councils and library managers to inform and educate the whole of the community – and its decision makers – about the public library's potential as the community's anchor or hub, or as social analyst Hugh Mackay has described it 'the new village green'.

They should be confident in doing so. An increasing number of reports and surveys, international and Australian, are asserting and confirming that unique public library capacity to connect and build communities. A major Australian example was the outstanding 2005 Victorian report *Libraries/building/communities,*[6] and from South Australia the August 2005 report *Investing in the community: South Australia public libraries adding value.* This notes that

> Libraries are often sited separately and not considered an integrated part of the council's services. Taking on a community building function challenges the roles that libraries play and provides a key opportunity for libraries to justify the strategic role they play in communities. Libraries can be the place to achieve these strategies for councils.[7]

From New Zealand – still arguably ahead of Australia in its commitment to the importance of education and public libraries – in March 2006 came its excellent national strategic framework for public libraries, to which reference has already been made. This states that

> *Public libraries engage, inspire and inform citizens and help build strong communities.*[8]

Those twelve words are the essence of what modern public libraries are increasingly about. They are words to be incorporated in public library mission statements, and conveyed to decision makers at every possible opportunity.

There are many commonalities in the international and Australian reports being researched and published about the evolving role of the public library, and its community capacity building reality and potential. Those reports raise important issues for the community, young and old, to debate and consider.

It is within the remit of a Friends of the Library group to initiate public forums, preferably in association with their councils and libraries, about those issues if a council or library does not take the initiative itself.

Public libraries as council shop windows

Its public libraries – not its infrastructure and services provision, or civic administration centre – are the most visible and accessible indicator of the dynamic of a council. This is because much of what any council provides for the community is effectively unrecognised and often unappreciated – until something goes wrong. A library should not only be a venue for interesting council displays and information about what it proposes and does for the community, it should be supported well by a council because it is the building, facility and service by which the council will be most recognised, and gain most plaudits if it does it well. People are generally very happy to have their rates spent on good public libraries. They are generally much less happy to have them spent on good council administration centres, regardless of the need for them. This is doubtless why there is still a tendency for councils to bundle in a new library with a proposal for a new civic administration building, regardless of whether it is in a suitable location for the public library.

The City of Christchurch in the South Island of New Zealand has what is possibly the best overall public library service in Australasia. Take a look at its library website http://library.christchurch. org.nz and you will gain an impression of the outcome of investing nearly 11 per cent of its rates in that service. That percentage might well alarm most Australian councils as it is at least double the rate percentage many of them provide to their library service. Yet, viewed in terms of the return on investment, it is not an unreasonable target for what is by far a council's most heavily used and valued provision for its community and its best shop window to a very large part – typically 60 per cent – of the community it serves.

The libraries in Christchurch say much about the dynamic, foresight and leadership of the City, which is confirmed by the following statement from its chief executive officer

> In Christchurch city, we believe libraries are about more than books and buildings. Libraries are at the hub of our communities…The benefits to our communities are well worth the ongoing significant investment. In the future, we anticipate even more innovation in the way libraries help create inclusive communities, and are centres for lifelong learning, fun and creativity.[9]

As a measure of the return on this investment for the Christchurch City Council, one of its senior librarians commented at the Adelaide library buildings conference

> In Christchurch people have done that complete flip from distrusting what the council is doing to appreciating what council has done for them. They are proud of their library service. They bring their friends, and visitors from overseas, into that service. Whenever I am taking people around the library, they follow after me saying 'Tell them this, tell them this'. They really value the service, and really appreciate the money being spent in their community.[10]

Those libraries in Christchurch are clearly the shop windows of a progressive council, as public libraries everywhere have the potential to be.

Looking ahead: the next 25 years for Mackay's libraries

Typically about 60 per cent of people use their public library. Other organisations and businesses would envy such very high levels of use and valuation. However, whilst public libraries are one of the few things in the our world which can never be overused, they can certainly be underused. At present as many as one in two people in Australia are not using their library, but for what reasons? Is it limited hours of opening, such as the lack of Sunday opening in Mackay? Is it because of unattractive, inaccessible and cramped buildings? Poor parking and poor transport? Not enough money spent on buying new books and other resources? Lack of awareness of what a modern public library offers? Is it poor marketing, or even reluctance to market the library by its management and staff hard pressed to cope with existing usage?

Mackay's libraries, like all public libraries, do not attract everyone in the community, which must limit their capacity to be community anchors.

This is something which could be a long term strategic focus for library advocacy and support by its Friends in your next 25 years – helping to bring to the library table all of those individuals and groups in the community who are currently excluded from those benefits which you all enjoy and appreciate. I urge you therefore to consider yourselves as the voice of the total community about the libraries, not just of those who already use them. Although a few libraries have Young Friends of the Library to help identify the needs of young people, most members of Friends groups are older adults. They may not think consciously about the capacity of their public library to anticipate and respond to the varied individual and social needs of young people as the community's future. It is very important that they – we – do so.

As Robert Putnam concluded, the development of social capital requires that we transcend our social, political and professional identities to connect with people unlike ourselves. That is a challenge for all of us who believe in the unique capacity of public libraries to build better lives and stronger communities.

It is a challenge in particular for Friends of Libraries to continue to evolve beyond providing practical, fundraising and moral support for their libraries, to being effective, well informed, advocates for better libraries for all in their communities.

To do so, Friends need a good knowledge of what is happening in the evolution of public libraries elsewhere in Australia, and internationally where a number of countries are giving them a high policy and funding priority. A suggestion for larger Friends groups is therefore that they consider having an information officer responsible for advising on locally relevant public library developments and issues in Australia and worldwide. It would be a role ideal for a former academic, teacher or librarian member of a group. Increasingly you will find that information and reports to the nation will appear on the FOLA website and in its newsletter, as FOLA itself continues to evolve as not only an advisory resource and support for Friends of Libraries, but as the national lay advocacy organisation for better libraries for all Australians.

Leading, fighting, persisting

In his 1947 report on the very impoverished condition of Australian public libraries, including in Queensland, British librarian Lionel McColvin emphasised that

> better library services for Australia won't just happen. The few must lead, must fight, must persist.[11]

He also observed that the major challenge, given the size of Australia and its sparse regional and rural populations, was how to provide good public libraries throughout the country, noting that

> No where else in the English speaking world will books have to be taken so far for so few – and no where will they mean so much.[12]

McColvin had discovered that wherever he went on his survey travels throughout Australia, that a cold beer could be found. So following his Churchillian rhetoric with a good Australian analogy, he then asserted

> But it must be done and it can be done…All that is needed is a book distributing system as efficient as, say the beer distributing organisation…That is the simple challenge.[13]

It is because that simple challenge was met, and because a few laypersons and library professionals did lead, fight and persist in arguing the case for public libraries for all with state and local governments, that Australia has caught up and now ranks in the first ten nations for its overall public library access and system. This is a remarkable achievement, much of which has only occurred during the 25 years of the existence of the Friends of Mackay Libraries. Yet there remains so much work to be done to ensure that the full potential of public libraries is understood, invested in, and capitalised on by decision makers at all levels of government.

Those laypersons were early friends of libraries in a very meaningful way – they made the difference at critical times. It is their legacy of informed and active lay advocacy of better libraries which has been bequeathed to the growing number of Friends of Libraries throughout Australia, for which you – the Friends of Mackay Libraries – have been a Queensland and national exemplar. Like other Friends of Libraries you represent all that is valuable in Australian communities – volunteers giving of their time and talents for the betterment of community life quality and connection.

As president of Friends of Libraries Australia I therefore have the greatest pleasure in conveying to your president Carmel Baretta FOLA's certificate of recognition of your great contribution and achievement. Thank you for your support of FOLA, congratulations on your silver jubilee, and best wishes for your endeavours for all in the Mackay community over the next 25 years…and beyond.

References

1   a list of public library descriptors is at www.fola.org.au

2   see www.dotars.gov.au/localgovt/nalg/factsheets/strong_resilient.aspx.

3   Monley, B Colocated rural public libraries: partnerships for progress *in* Bundy,A ed *Places and spaces: public libraries for the 21st century in Australia and New Zealand conference proceedings 31 March-1 April 2006* Adelaide, Auslib Press 2006 p59

4   Moen, N New libraries and new spaces for community outcomes: Christchurch City Libraries' strategy *in* Bundy, A op cit p24

5   *Public libraries of New Zealand: a strategic framework 2006 to 2016* Wellington, Local Govt NZ, Lianza and National Library of NZ 2006 p21 www.lianza.org.nz/library/files/store_011/StrategicFramework2006.pdf

6   *Libraries/building/communities: the vital contribution of Victoria's public libraries* Melbourne, State Library of Victoria 2005 www.slv.vic.gov.au/about/information/publications/policies_report/plu_lbc.html

7   *Investing in the community: South Australian public libraries adding value* Adelaide, State Library of SA 2005 p3

8   *Public libraries of New Zealand* op cit p1

9   ibid p21

10   Moen, N First panel session *in* Bundy, A op cit p195

11   McColvin, L *Public libraries in Australia: present conditions and future possibilities with notes on other library services* Melbourne, ACER/MUP 1947 p113

12   ibid p89

13   ibid