

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME: PUBLIC LIBRARIES AS THE COMMUNITY'S THIRD PLACE

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It is a pleasure for me to join you in the celebration of the redevelopment of this fine Stratford Library. Thank you for the invitation to do so. It is a double pleasure to be here because, as president of Friends of Libraries Australia it also enables me to recognise publicly the role and invaluable work of the Friends of Cairns Libraries (FOCL) as advocates for better libraries for all in the Cairns region, and for its great contribution to the improvement of the libraries through, for example, author visits, book sales, the five satellite libraries in aged care facilities, services to the homebound – and at the other end of the age spectrum, storytime events for children. FOCL members also have the most attractive tee shirts of any Library Friends group in Australia!

It is also worthy of recognition that Friends of Libraries groups achieve more in partnership with councils and with library managers and staff. The success of FOCL indicates the strength of that partnership in Cairns.

Although Friends of Cairns Libraries was only established in January 2004 and – compared with FOL groups such as that at Mackay which celebrated its 25th anniversary about three years ago – is still young, it has done much in just five years. To mark its fifth anniversary I am therefore pleased to convey to it a copy of FOLA's *Friends of Libraries resource book* for ongoing inspiration and ideas.

The return on investment in public libraries

It is often said of public libraries 'Build it and they will come'. That certainly is the worldwide experience – from Finland to Singapore and many places in between – of the renaissance in investment in new public libraries and rebuilds which has been occurring during at least the last decade. The redeveloped, award-winning and very busy State Library of Queensland – or as I have heard it described by Queensland public librarians down south, the State Library of *Brisbane* – is testimony to the return on investment in libraries.

Australia has had over 250 new or rebuilt public libraries in the last ten years, and many more are in progress. Much of this development, and the issues involved, was covered in the *Places and spaces: public libraries for the 21st century in Australia and New Zealand* conference held in Adelaide in 2006.¹ The response to those new buildings and rebuilds has been universally outstanding in terms of usage; the recognition of public libraries as a community's Third Place after work or school, and home; and appreciation by communities of the investment on their behalf by their elected decision makers. It is for good reason that good public libraries have been described as 'council shop windows' and 'primary indicators of modern and progressive councils'.

Public libraries are the public face of councils because they very visibly give something back to the community. This has proven to be the case, for example, in Christchurch in New Zealand which now has possibly the best public library service in Australia and New Zealand. Its city council is very highly regarded by the community for its priority investment in its public libraries, on which it spends 10% of its rates revenue. As a senior librarian from Christchurch has observed

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 really value the service, and really appreciate the money being spent in the community.²

Staffing: a critical consideration

The overall, and sustained, increase in use of a replaced or rebuilt public library has invariably been at least 25% and often much higher. This means of course, that the planning for new public libraries or rebuilds must factor in the greater staff workload, even if the adoption of modern technology in a new building can alleviate some of that workload. Because public libraries are ‘people places’ technology can never replace the need for specialist staff and user-staff interaction in them. A major issue for public libraries throughout Australia, which sometimes the very high demand on new libraries has brought to the fore, is their relative lack of such staff to focus on the provision and marketing of services – for example to children, young people and working with schools; to older adults; to multicultural populations; outreach; and to reader development to ensure that all users can derive maximum benefit from the great range of print, electronic and other resources they are now able to provide.

Australia’s public libraries: unique but underfunded

Public libraries are unique as neutral, multidimensional, and safe public agencies and destinations cooperating within their states and territories and across Australia in meeting inclusively the needs of the whole Australian population – literally from ‘cradle to grave’. They are one of the very few public investments of which it can be said they can never be overused. They are used by 60% of the population, or over 12 million people, again many more than any other public agency or service.

Yet in Australia they are endeavouring to meet the increasing demands on them on a meagre 9c per Australian per day. This is less than half the ABC now receives for an audience of about 20% of Australians. It compares very unfavourably with countries such as Denmark, which invest *three times* as much per capita in their public libraries. Even New Zealand does better than Australia.

Why is this so, when Australians have always been recognised as voracious readers and consumers of information? One factor is the very late development of public libraries for everyone in Australia, particularly in Queensland and South Australia. Politicians and other decision makers (mostly males) needed much convincing from the 1930s on, that the system of usually impoverished subscription libraries provided in the mechanics’ institutes, or in Queensland by the schools of arts, did not meet the need. Those libraries clearly did not do so, were used by only about 3% of the population, and typically made no provision for children and young people – such an important part of the mission of the modern public library. However in some ways those mechanics’ institutes and schools of arts represented, as do modern public libraries, a response to the need of communities for connection, learning, information, improvement and leisure – their Third Place. The history of those institutions, and their often handsome and extant buildings, is worth knowing to ensure that the policy and government subsidy failings which contributed to their loss of relevance and demise are not repeated by governments with public libraries in the 21st century. I therefore have pleasure in donating to the Stratford Library a copy of *Pioneering culture: mechanics’s institutes and schools of arts in Australia*³, a book published in 1994 and of which one of the two authors is a Queenslander.

Other significant reasons why Australia was a late developer of free public libraries were the complexities of Australia’s three levels of government, and the general weakness and narrow horizons of local government, especially outside of the capital cities.

Public libraries in Australia: ubiquitous at last

The outcome was that it took 73 years, from 1935 – when a report funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York⁴ lambasted Australia’s governmental neglect of public library development – until 15 March 2008, before all states and local governments in Australia provided access to a free public library for their communities.

That date of 15 March 2008 will doubtless resonate with many of you here today. It was, of course, the date of the local government mergers enforced by the State Government of Queensland. For it was on that date that the Rockhampton Regional Council came into existence – and the Shire of Fitzroy disappeared into it. Australia could at last claim comprehensive public library provision, because the Shire of Fitzroy’s one enduring claim to fame is that it was the very last council in Australia to not provide or support a free public

library service for its 16,000 strong community – despite numerous attempts over the years to persuade it otherwise.

The likely increasing size of local government units throughout Australia by more mergers, especially in NSW and WA, will cause stresses and local concerns as it has in Queensland. However the experience worldwide is that local government units do need to be of a population and financial size to be able to provide more sophisticated responses to total community needs. The evidence to date is that public libraries can not only be a major beneficiary of larger local government units, but can also lead in demonstrating to anxious communities the benefits of larger councils. This is shown very clearly in Queensland by, for example, the Sunshine Coast Libraries.⁵ This led by introducing a single library card from the first day of the Sunshine Coast merger, and in undertaking research to identify that communities in the new council were receiving, conservatively, a return on investment(ROI) of \$5.45 for every dollar invested – a similar ROI to that identified in numerous overseas studies, and which is probably similar to that in Cairns. Another example of merger proactive leadership was, of course, Cairns Regional Library. In the merger with the Douglas Shire, from day one, was achieved not only a single library card, but also a complex and staff intensive merged database of the two library systems.

So, in Australia, the great positive we can now claim is that across our Great South Land nearly every one of its occupants and visitors now has some form of access to a free public library service, and through it to the library resources of the whole nation – and that includes in Queensland and the NT in particular access by indigenous people through their Knowledge Centres. Even the USA cannot make such a claim. So that is a major achievement – something in which Australia can take pride, but on which it must now build.

Public libraries: no grounds for complacency

This is because the reality is that Australia, including Queensland, has many second-rate, poorly staffed and poorly accommodated libraries still operating essentially as passive lenders of ageing and inadequately refreshed collections, and of little attraction to young people. It will be decades before some will be replaced or rebuilt, by which time their use may well be largely confined to an ageing population and decision makers may, some perhaps happily, conclude that they are not worthy of any investment at all. The lessons of the loss of relevance, declining use, and demise of the mechanics' institutes and schools of arts will have been lost.

Recent public library building audits in places as far apart as the UK, NSW and Victoria, have confirmed that many buildings are poorly located, invisible, difficult to access, unattractive particularly to young people, and simply lack the space and spaces to be the community's Third Place, after work or school, and home. They are incapable of responding to the requirements of modern public libraries and their users of all ages.

Many of the 160 or so descriptors of modern public libraries to found on the Friends of Libraries Australia website⁶ recognise the inclusiveness, community connection and capacity building, and social capital roles of modern public libraries. These descriptors include

Anchor schemes for urban regeneration
Community anchors
Community builders
Community catalysts
Family centred places
Friends to the lonely
Hangouts at the heart of the community
Living rooms of the city
Multicultural havens

Physical hubs of diverse communities
Places with something which will offend someone
Reading places for children
The real school
Umbrella institutions of the learning society
The new village green
Windows to the world

It is therefore a tribute to the Cairns Regional Council and its predecessor that in committing to the redevelopment of the Stratford Library it has implicitly recognised what public libraries represent for the wellbeing of local communities, and for the 60% of people of all ages and circumstances who use and highly value them – and also of the 13% of disadvantaged others in the Cairns community who Victorian research suggests could use and benefit from public libraries if those libraries were universally more

attractive, accessible and better marketed. This is commendably something of which Cairns Libraries is well aware, with its very strategic approach to marketing.

Public libraries: the investment hiatus

This Stratford Library is particularly a tribute to the Council because unlike state governments such as NSW and Victoria, the Qld Government does not provide, I understand, any incentive to councils to build or rebuild public libraries. Nor does the Queensland Government now, in common with the other states to a lesser or greater degree, have anything to be proud about in its ongoing investment in the state's public library system. It is this insidious neglect by state governments which is the primary reason Australia's public library system is so poorly and unevenly funded, and is so far behind international best practice.

Over the last 20 years in particular local government in Queensland has increasingly been required to contribute more public library funding, whilst the state government's contribution has declined greatly in relative terms, a classic example of that cost shifting with which local government in Australia is now so familiar. The Qld Government now contributes only about \$20million pa (about 1.5 cents per Queenslanders per day) to local public libraries, compared with an expenditure of over \$6billion pa to Education and the Arts. This is less than 14% of public library funding, and effectively for many councils 10% or less. The steady decline from an already modest 24% in 1998/9, to 16% in 2003/4, to 14% in 2006/7 ranks Queensland as conspicuously the second lowest public library grant state government in Australia after NSW.

As another indicator of the relative decline in the state government's partnership in funding the state's public library system, in 2000/1 the state's public library grant as a percentage of the Qld budget was 0.173%. In 2006/7 it was even less, at 0.06%, compared with 19% for the state's Department of Education, Training and the Arts – extraordinarily little, given that the state's public libraries are by far the most heavily used public service Queensland has, and that about one third of its users are children, students, home schoolers and other young people.⁷

Public library investment: the responsibilities

In Australia it is the policy and funding responsibility of state and territory governments to ensure their health, education and other critical community infrastructure works well and equitably for all communities and individuals. It is surely, then, their policy and funding responsibility in the 21st century to ensure the welfare and progress of their public library systems – the performance of which impacts on so many of those areas such as early childhood development, education, lifelong learning, health, families, ageing, and building stronger communities.

Public libraries are *not*, then, the exclusive responsibility of their local providers. They are a shared responsibility of state and local government, with state governments having a leadership responsibility and oversight of their performance. Given the increasing demands on local government, there is only so much that councils can do to increase their investment in public libraries – although some councils can certainly do more than they do at present.

The substantially missing investment link for Australia's public libraries is thus the state governments. The missing policy link is the federal government, which has yet to consider or understand the need to hold those states and territories to account for their neglect of their public library systems, as it increasingly is doing in other community infrastructure and services areas. There is some hope that the first Australian Public Libraries Summit to be held in Canberra on 16 July 2009 will at least bring forward these critical issues for debate.

Public libraries can never be overused, but...

It is also worthy of comment and commendation that the Cairns Regional Council has not gone down the tempting but short sighted economic rationalist track of consolidating its libraries into far fewer larger units. As mentioned earlier, public libraries can never be overused. Any democratic and civilized community should want them to be used as much as possible and to get the maximum return on investment in them. Techniques and negative policies to ration their use therefore have no place. However research has demonstrated that public libraries can be heavily used, but still underused. There may be a variety of barriers to awareness of what modern public libraries provide and to their usage, including poor marketing, opening

hours, staffing, service, unattractive and cramped buildings, and lack of parking or public transport. There are also barriers of perception. For example, it is not uncommon for new arrivals and refugees from countries with no public library tradition, to assume that they must pay to use them.

However a primary barrier is simply lack of enough public libraries which are readily accessible, to children and older people in particular. In The Netherlands it is required that a public library is within walking/cycling distance of everyone, and a similar distance of about three kilometres is the benchmark now being applied even in a public transport rich city such as Greater London. In Australia, there are examples, such as Coffs Harbour, where the higher cost of fuel has resulted in less use of a central shopping district and large central library in favour of the use of local shops and the smaller branch libraries.

Interestingly, the UK central government is currently conducting a public inquiry into the intentions and justification of one local authority to 'rationalise' its library system by closing 11 branches. This inquiry follows great protest from communities about the prospective loss of their local library branch. It is in the context that, unlike in Australia, local authorities in the UK are required to provide 'a comprehensive and efficient' public library service to certain standards, including access.

The UK's Culture Secretary has commented in relation to the need for the inquiry

Public libraries play a central role at the heart of our communities, providing a rich source of information, wisdom and learning. This is all the more true in difficult economic times. They should never be an optional extra for local authorities...because ready access to high quality libraries for all is absolutely central to a truly public service. ...Ensuring our public library service is fit for the 21st century can sometimes mean difficult decisions, and I would certainly not want to stand in the way of any council who wants to modernize. But the balance has to be right and modernization should never compromise core provision of access.⁸

So, well done to the Cairns Regional Council in responding to its communities and recognizing the need to have a range of library provision and access points for them. Two of the public library descriptors to be found on the FOLA list is that public libraries are 'significant markers on a civic skyline' and 'signs of a well-functioning government'. That Council has achieved that civic marker in Stratford with the redeveloped library, does indeed indicate that – despite the inevitable stresses, strains and squabbles faced by merged local authorities in particular – it is indeed functioning well.

There are other councils in Queensland which have some way to go in this recognition. The worst example in Queensland, indeed Australia, is Toowoomba. This has only has one large, outdated and overcrowded library to serve its urban population of about 100,000. This virtually guarantees that many Toowoomba children in their critical formative years will never be able to regularly access a public library, in a situation where their school libraries are generally deficient too. By comparison Cairns Libraries provides a more appropriate nine libraries of varying sizes, complemented by a home library service and the aged care satellite libraries, for its fast growing population of about 150,000.

With respect to Toowoomba, the positive news is that – largely thanks to awareness raising by the 10 year old Toowoomba Library Friends with assistance from Friends of Libraries Australia – the new regional council is now considering the provision of a first branch library in its urban area.

Expanding horizons

Among the other positive developments for public libraries in Queensland is the positioning paper *Expanding horizons: positioning Queensland public libraries for the future 2008-2012*.⁹ It is an apt title, as public libraries do indeed expand the horizons of all who use them.

This collaboration between the State Library, the Queensland Public Library Association and the Local Government Association of Queensland describes well what modern public libraries are about, and focuses on the key themes for improving Queensland's public libraries as welcoming spaces, connectors of people, developers of social capital, providers of learning and leisure, and embracers of technology and digital inclusion. The paper is described as a 'joint initiative of three major stakeholders in Queensland's public libraries', including local government. However conspicuously absent as a major stakeholder in Queensland's public library system is the State Government of Queensland itself, despite the fact that

'*Expanding horizons* recognises the considerable investment made by local and state government in public library services'.

This statement about 'considerable' investment may be politically soothing but it is manifestly wrong and misleading. The Qld Government does not make, by any definition, a 'considerable' investment in Queensland's public libraries. That investment is now paltry, and the state government will need to do much very better if everyone in Queensland is ever likely to have access to libraries such as this redeveloped facility at Stratford – local government cannot meet alone the challenge of modern, better, more accessible, libraries with up to date collections and technology for all in Queensland.

The state government, certainly, has invested considerably in the State Library, and it has received a handsome return for that investment. But the State Library building redevelopment has had little direct return for local public libraries, their staff and their users throughout Queensland.

Expanding horizons nonetheless, does serve as a concise positioning paper. It now needs to be followed by a strategic framework for Queensland's public libraries which identifies their investment needs, and most importantly does not shirk the question of how those needs should be met.

Stratford therefore stands as an important symbol of what can, and should be, available to every community, large or small, throughout Queensland.

I congratulate all concerned in its achievement, from the Council's elected members and officers, to the architect and builders. Not least I congratulate Kerrie Still and her library colleagues. They have grappled so well with the very time consuming challenges of planning new and redeveloped libraries, at the same time as developing and running what is recognised as one of Australia's most innovative and proactive public library services – an outstanding asset to the Cairns Regional Council and the communities it serves.

This address is entitled *Build it and they will come*. That has been the experience of new and redeveloped public libraries worldwide, even more so in this time of economic downturn. Since its doors opened on 26 March, it has already been the experience of the Stratford Library. There is every indication that its people are increasingly turning to their library as *their* Third Place – and that they greatly appreciate, just like the citizens of Christchurch in New Zealand, what their Council is doing for them.

References

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