

A PLACE WITH SPACE: HOW DOES YOUR LIBRARY RATE?

Presentation to a forum of South Australian Friends of Libraries State Library of SA 6 April 2006

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The modern public library has been fairly described as the anchor of the community, and by Australian social commentator Hugh McKay as the 'new village green'.

However to play in full this unique cradle to grave community connection and social capital role, a public library needs accessible, generous and attractive buildings containing different but connected spaces. It also needs to be open long hours seven days a week, and adequately staffed with professional librarians.

The 31st March-1st April 2006 saw in Adelaide the first major Australian and New Zealand conference of architects, consultants, librarians, library suppliers, and local government representatives to review the progress, and issues, in achieving those types of libraries. *Places and spaces: public libraries for the 21st century* provided much confirmation from Australia and New Zealand about the renaissance of public library building – a world wide phenomenon as more countries recognise the very high return on investing in them.

In a preconference study tour conference delegates were impressed by six examples – in mostly lower socioeconomic areas – of very heavily used recent public library buildings in South Australia, the Hilton, Hindmarsh, Mawson Lakes, Playford, Munno Para and Burnside libraries. During the conference presentations delegates were also shown numerous examples of really attractive and welcoming libraries in Australia and New Zealand able to be the community's anchor institution, often complete with facilities such as learning centres, homework centres, youth zones, electronic training suites, generous display areas, local studies rooms, comfortable lounge areas, Friends of the Library rooms, Justice of the Peace rooms, coffee shops and meeting rooms.

Great progress is being made in replacing or rebuilding old and unattractive buildings typically 30 years old. Yet some Australian councils are still dragging their heels on replacing the buildings of what is by far their most heavily used and valued community service. Unless there is community awareness of the deficiencies of those buildings, and a willingness to speak up about them, some councils may continue to procrastinate about new libraries or major rebuilds.

Friends of Libraries Australia is concerned about those many people of all ages, circumstances and backgrounds who cannot experience the full benefits of a modern public library because of poor buildings and poor access to them. For this reason – on behalf of Friends of Libraries groups and the 60 per cent of Australians who use their public libraries – in October 2005 it made a short submission to the federal treasurer about the potential return on investment in replacing the many ageing, too small, and second rate public library buildings in Australia. That submission responded to a call for submissions from community groups for priorities in the 2006/7 federal budget. FOLA's was the only one made by a library related organisation.

The submission focused on the need to accelerate the renewal of the country's public library infrastructure, particularly in lower socioeconomic areas, and in regional and rural Australia.

Stated in the submission was that

Compared with other developed countries, including New Zealand, Australia was slow to develop a comprehensive local public library service. It has caught up, and now ranks in the top ten nations for its overall provision, much of which is a development of the last 40 years. As a consequence its initial building stock and mobile libraries are now increasingly in need of replacement or rebuilding. A national survey in 2000 found that 38% of libraries, about 600, have poor or very poor space. Their major deficiencies are

- ◇ lack of attractive, welcoming buildings to encourage more young people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities to take advantage of the wide range of services and resources they freely and inclusively provide
- ◇ overall lack of space and severe crowding of collections and user areas
- ◇ lack of capacity to provide more information technology and internet access to help address the digital divide in the community
- ◇ lack of electronic training suites for older adults in particular
- ◇ lack of study spaces for school and tertiary students
- ◇ lack of community meeting rooms
- ◇ lack of reading areas for families and children
- ◇ lack of disability access and easy access for older adults
- ◇ lack of public toilets
- ◇ lack of parking

In response to those deficiencies, local government across Australia is endeavouring to replace and rebuild libraries...About 200 new library buildings and rebuilds will have been constructed, with occasional state government assistance, between 2000 and 2006 – many of them excellent and of world standard. These libraries invariably attract 15-35% greater use by the community of all ages. There are at least 400 libraries remaining to be replaced or rebuilt...

The FOLA submission is very unlikely to result in federal dollars directly for more new libraries, but it does point to the need for systematic state and local government action to identify poor libraries, and for well informed community pressure for their replacement and improvement.

That identification and pressure still largely falls to library managers as part of their strategic responsibilities. Experience shows, however, that a limitation of that singular responsibility has been that a library manager and staff pushing the case for a better library can too easily be viewed by councils as a 'professional bleat' of those staff, rather than them truly endeavouring to improve a council's most used and valued community service for the benefit of all. Those beneficiaries include the administrators and elected members of councils themselves, given that its library is a council's most effective 'shop window'. A public library, not its civic centre, is the most conspicuous image indicator of the dynamic of a council and its responsiveness to the total needs of the community of which it is the servant.

So what is the solution, given that few councils in Australia have anything like a library advisory committee, or one with community representation on it? A number of Friends of Libraries around Australia have shown the way – as the library voice of their communities – by telling their councils about the importance of their libraries, asserting their rebuilding as a high priority and by working with library managers to convey to councils the great community and council return on investment which good public library buildings always provide. Five examples of FOL effectiveness in South Australia alone, are in Maitland, Burnside, Unley, Playford and most recently Stirling.

A challenge is that library users, and sometimes Friends of Libraries, are far too accepting of old and inadequate library buildings and their facilities. Expectations can be too low. Sometimes this is

because older adults who were children when public libraries were rare in Australia may still consider good public libraries a privilege, not fundamental to a literate, educated, connected and civilized society.

It may also be because people have grown accustomed to local mediocrity, and have not had their expectations raised by exposure to newer libraries, or are not aware of how much all developed countries are revitalizing their public libraries, in part by replacing and redeveloping their buildings. It is also because, by anecdotal evidence from librarians, users dissatisfied with a library's facilities and space are notoriously difficult to persuade to raise the issue with their council. This is sometimes for fear that a council may react by actually cutting services, or that user complaint will reflect against library staff who may be bending over backwards to maintain a high level of service in difficult funding and physical circumstances. Library staff typically have the highest reputation for service commitment among council staff. This sometimes works against them and the library service.

It is legitimate for Friends of Libraries to seek to involve themselves – as the library voice of their communities – in the overall strategic directions of their libraries, and to concern themselves in particular about their physical condition. This requires groups to seek information from FOLA and their library managers about the exciting developments now occurring in library buildings, where possible to visit examples of new library buildings, and to assess the strengths and limitations of what their council is currently providing. There are numerous indicators which can be used to assess the adequacy of older library buildings. A useful checklist containing some building, access and facilities adequacy indicators is to be found at the end of FOLA's second report to the nation *Community critical: Australian public libraries serving seniors* www.fola.org.au.

One basic indicator is how crowded together library shelves are, and if they are too high and too low for comfortable access by all. Library users, like shoppers, need 60 per cent of the library's floor space to browse comfortably. This leaves 40 per cent of space for shelving and other fittings. This ratio is reversed in too many public libraries because of lack of space. Books, including in children's areas, which are shelved too high or too low are effectively inaccessible to many library users. The number of items consulted or borrowed from high and low shelves is always very much less than from shelving at upper body level. Apart from aesthetics and easier line of sight, this is the reason why modern library buildings have low shelves, often on wheels, and with much greater face out display of items. If your library or libraries displays those characteristics, it is a clear sign that it is time to start asking questions about the solution to its space problem – and that solution usually means a new or expanded library, not simply more and higher and lower shelves, or throwing away half of the library's collection.

Fortunately an increasing number of councils in Australia – serving all socioeconomic levels of population – are investing in new library buildings, and are doing so with minimal impact on council rates. Those councils in NSW that are not yet awake to the priority will soon have it demonstrated to them by a project to audit the age, size and suitability of public library buildings in that state. A similar national audit is proposed for the UK, and a major recommendation at the library buildings conference held in Adelaide was that all states should conduct audits to enable a clear picture of public library buildings strengths and deficiencies across the country.

Before that occurs, Friends of Libraries could usefully be identifying how their library would fare in such an audit. If the identification reveals major space and design issues, be aware that new library buildings often have a long gestation time. It is never too early to start talking to your council and the library manager about the council's strategy and timeline for addressing them, and to consider convening a public forum in your community about the issues if necessary.