

Let there be light!

The State Library of Victoria's first public viewing of the recently installed skylights in the Domed Reading Room represented a milestone in the library's \$200 million re-development program. More than 12 000 visitors came to the State Library's dome open day on Sunday, 30 June to preview the restoration of the majestic octagonal room. It was the first time since 1959, when the original skylights were covered with copper sheeting to prevent water leakage, that the public could see natural light streaming in through the dome.

'Sitting as it does at the heart of the library, the restoration of the dome's skylights marks a major milestone in the State Government's re-development program which is due for completion in 2004,' said the State Library of Victoria's chief executive officer and state librarian, Frances Awcock. 'It's a welcome sign that our ongoing relocation of people and materials to temporary homes is almost over.'

To accommodate the restoration work in the Domed Reading Room, the State Library has had to relocate 18.5 kms of collection material and find alternative accommodation for staff and related services, with much of the material being stored in the five off-site storage locations.

'Despite the re-development work going on around us for the past twelve years, we have made every effort to continue to provide a high quality service to the public,' said Mrs Awcock. 'We have also endeavoured to expand our role as a centre of learning that builds on our documentary heritage and opens up the world's information resources to the people of Victoria.'

Agent for the architectural firm Ancher, Mortlock and Woolley and site architect, Peter Richards, said he was impressed at the library's commitment to the public. 'It's incredible that the library has remained open during the renovations. It would have been much quicker if it had closed down its operations. But, instead, the library has chosen to do whatever is neces-



Looking up to the refurbished dome

sary to maintain a level of service and accessibility to its users,' he said.

On the dome open day, there was the momentary weekend lull, free of the sounds of jackhammers and drills. Then at 12 noon, the crowds arrived. State Library staff and volunteers handed out 4000 showbags and visitors eagerly climbed the marble staircases for the first glimpse of the Domed Reading Room, closed to the public since 1999.

'It was gratifying to see the public's awed responses to the Dome's restoration, signifying as it does, the return to the people of one of the most beautiful reading rooms in the world,' Mrs Awcock said. 'Many people I spoke to said they remembered the Domed Reading Room as being dark and sombre. They were amazed at how much light was coming through the skylights and the difference it has made to the feel of the room. In a metaphorical sense, the light is a symbol of the vastly improved access to our services and collections that the library's re-development is designed to achieve.'

One of Melbourne's great architectural heritage sites, the Domed Reading Room was built in 1913 and was inspired by two of the world's great libraries, the British Museum Library in London and the Library of Congress in Washington. It will re-open as the La Trobe Reading Room in 2003.

Painstaking care to detail has ensured the heritage aspects of the Domed Reading Room are being retained. The glass skylights have been reinstated into the original steel and reinforced concrete framework, and the bookshelves and custom-built Queensland silky oak desks with their green lanterns are being refurbished in preparation for the official opening next year.

This is not to overlook the role technology has played in restoring the dome and turning it into a space that meets the requirements of today's users. The new skylights, for example, have been made from the latest in glass technology and consist of two layers of laminated heat-treated toughened glass. The internal layer is opaque glass that diffuses the light, necessary to prevent damage to the collection material that will be housed in the La Trobe Reading Room.

New technology has been discretely integrated into the space, improving air conditioning, services and information technology, without impacting on the historical integrity of the room.

'The final stages of the redevelopment will see the construction of a café, shop and a number of gallery spaces, creating a Library for 21st century users, while still retaining the unique heritage aspects of the site,' Mrs Awcock said. ■