

A library of the future: the Playford Library, South Australia

Kym Gravener, Harvey Publicity

One are the days when spending time in a library meant something similar to carrying out penance in the strictest of convents: no talking, no eating, no music and certainly no fun!

Perceived as quiet, cold, bland and boring, traditional libraries have, in the past, tended to look alike and not been somewhere to spend time or 'hang out'. The traditional librarian was often perceived as somewhat unapproachable and standoffish.

Welcome to the Playford Library in South Australia — a library that is engaging, bright, happy and energetic. Awarded the South Australian Chapter Design Institute of Australia 2004 Award of Merit and shortlisted in the Public/Institutional Interior Design Category of the 2005 Interior Design Awards, the library's contemporary and innovative design represents the future face of libraries.

The City of Playford, when planning its new library services, was searching for something different. The council wanted a library that demonstrated leading-edge technology in a stimulating, casual environment;

that enticed new and younger users to the library who would remain interested and be encouraged to return; and that provided a space for a diverse community to engage in learning. Through clever design, spatial detailing and graphics, the architectural firm Hassell has achieved just that and created a new library benchmark along the way.

Located in Munno Para Shopping City, the Playford Library is in a unique location to capture a varied audience. In order to have the library blend in with its environs and to move away from traditional design and expectations, Hassell conscientiously developed a retail bookstore concept for the library which incorporates a music store concept and promotes café culture. The space was designed to have a 'buzz' and be fun, transparent, user-friendly, non-intimidating and attract new customers. This concept was a driving factor in the layout and in the selections for finishes, materials and the graphics package.

The desired sense of 'openness' and 'transparency' was achieved through the introduction of non-traditional information desks and an 'engine room' that brought librarians out of the backroom and into the open.

To encourage self-help and to ensure that library staff were circulating and engaging with customers in a non-threatening manner, the new information desks were designed to be small and at standing height. The customer and librarian are encouraged to stand together on the same side of the counter, thereby interacting on a more equal basis. To break down barriers even further, the workroom, dubbed the 'engine room', was placed at the front and in the middle of the library space. Working inside a glassed-in area, the staff and the tasks they undertake are clearly visible.

The location of the internet area and café, also at the front of the library, assists in promoting the facilities available and encourages new patrons. People and movement are visible to potential customers walking in the mall and the 'buzz' created entices them into the library.

Another key aspect of the design are the specific zones that Hassell created to ensure that differing target groups and interest groups are catered for. These zones include the Internet Café, Music Hub, Games and Reading, Children's Zone, Café, Immunisation and Community Meeting Room, Study Zone, Book Area, and Council Customer Service Area. Each area has its own theme and a dedicated space. Furniture was selected



The graphics serve to enhance and identify areas

to suit the end-user and design theme within each zone. For instance, the children's zone has colourful, child-size tables and chairs; the reading zone has comfortable lounges; and the study zone has communal tables with bench seats. Fully integrated with the finishes selected, the graphics, designed by Hassell, serve to enhance and identify areas and to enable ease of movement between zones whilst creating interest at a macro and micro level.

A further key requirement for the library was the need for flexibility of space. The library staff wanted to be able to move book collections with a minimum of fuss, but still have the collection appear fully integrated. As a result, the majority of built forms are kept to the rear of the tenancy, with most of the fittings and fixtures being moveable. A completely interchangeable category labelling system was also developed by Playford Library, Hassell and the signage contractor, enabling maximum flexibility for the future whilst maintaining a clear finding aid for library users. The layout is designed like a retail bookstore, with signage in terms of genre (cooking, travel, medicine etc), again making the library experience more user-friendly.

And from all accounts users are appreciating the new design. Since moving to the Munno Para Shopping City, the new Playford Library has had a 400 per cent increase in users — a good reason to say goodbye to the traditional and welcome the library of the future.



This lounge space incorporates listening/sound poles and a newspaper/magazine browsing area

Design by architectural firm Hassell
Photography by Adam Bruzone

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Contact us 02 9557 9556 fax: 02 9557 9558
cecilia_kugler@ckdesign.com.au

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