# What do an Apple store and a library have in common?

Christine Mackenzie, CEO, Yarra Plenty Regional Library

The *Future of Public Libraries* conference, held at the New York Public Library (18–19 May 2006), was sponsored by the New York Public Library and the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. Around 80 people from around the world attended this invitation only event. Participants included library directors, library staff and trustees, architects, urban planners, representatives from the technology and communications sectors, cultural institutions and from major foundations.

The most critical issues facing public libraries today and in the future were discussed:

- Trends in technology and communications and their implications for public libraries.
- How these trends affect future public library building.
- Patterns of library use now and in the future.
- Collections – physical and electronic.

Among the conference speaker highlights was Peter Bohlin, a principal of Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, Architects. He is the creator of the Apple stores around the world (opening at a rate of one every nine days). He drew parallels between these stores and libraries, emphasising the need for transparency – making the inside visible outside, and the outside visible inside. He talked about making places that are magic to be in, places where people love to be. Coincidentally the newest Apple store opened on 5th Avenue that evening. It is open 24/7 and it does look magical, with its glass walls soaring up above street level, floating over the underground store with the suspended Apple hanging in the space. (See pictures at http://www.apple.com/retail/fifthavenue/gallery/.)
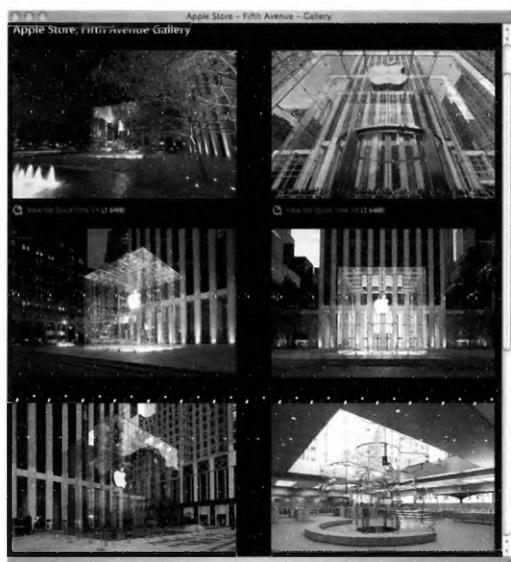
Peter Bohlin showed us how Apple prototype the stores, building them in warehouses and trying them out before fitting out the actual sites. He talked about how they make learning fun and irresistible, with stores holding classes on different topics such as how to use your iPod; or where people can come with their ideas and get help to enhance their Mac projects, with teams of 'creatives' teaching one-on-one how to re-touch photos, compose music and make movies. It's a whole different take on retail stores, especially as Apple could simply sell their products online if they chose. But instead they are creating these beautiful new stores in prime real estate as physical places for people to come to and interact and learn.

The 'Libraries and technology' stream featured Rolf Hapel, the Director of the Arhus Public Library, Denmark, and winner of the Gates award in 2004. (http://www.aakb.dk) The main message for library websites is that they should be interactive and participatory. Arhus library in collaboration with other Danish Libraries has created a lot of content especially for Danish literature and music. They have developed an Amazon-style personalised reading suggestion list using their library management system. They are incorporating Web 2.0 with borrowers writing reviews that are published on the website. Rolf is the keynote speaker at the 'Best of the Best' forum, a pre-conference ALIA event in Perth on 19 September, presented by the ALIA Public Libraries Reference Group.

Maija Berndtson, who was recently in Melbourne for the Public Libraries 2020: Content and Access Summit, described the Library 10 project in Helsinki. (http://www.lib.hel.fi) This amalgamated internet and music library has created a new kind of facility where people can create their own music or videos, borrow a musical instrument, edit their photos or even read or borrow a book.

The final speaker of the conference was Kevin Ryan, CEO and co-founder of ShopWiki.com. He is one of the most accomplished and well-known internet entrepreneurs in New York City. He helped build DoubleClick from a startup of 20 people to a very profitable global leader with 1500 employees. Last year DoubleClick was sold for $1.1billion.

Kevin Ryan told us that he used to visit a library in upstate New York on the weekends with his children where he has a house. He observed a library with many books that no-one was reading and few computers that had queues of people waiting to use them. He asked the librarian why they didn't get more computers but was told that they could not afford them. He suggested that spending some of the $2.5 million per annum book vote on more technology might be the way to go. Because the library is not being used, the weekend hours are being cut, and it is no longer open when he wants to visit it.

He told us that electronic books are about to hit, and that the vehicle will be the video iPod. These currently are available with a half screen but in 12–18 months will be available with a full screen and will be able to pick up television. A medical student he knows has loaded an encyclopaedia onto his iPod, so he can learn his medical terms while he listens to music waiting for his coffee at Starbucks.

The Conference echoed many of the themes from the State Library of Victoria's Library of the 21st century symposium (http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/programs/events/2006/symposium/index.html) and the Public Libraries 2020: Content and Access Summit, also sponsored by SLV, held in February and March in Melbourne. The strong message coming through is that we need to be very sure that we know what our role is as public libraries and that we need to be providing information in the media that people want it and to be enablers of learning, creativity and community.