

## Library Buildings: Strengthening Communities

About a quarter-century ago, as a humble librarian, I first became involved in planning library buildings, I had a steep learning curve. One of the first principles which I learned, along with Harry Faulkner-Brown's 'ten commandments', was 'make it beautiful, but make it work'.

The quest for comfort, convenience and visual appeal blended with the practical pursuit of modular structures and functionality. 'User-friendliness' became a buzzword. Partly it was a reaction to daunting structures of the sixties and seventies, or precipitous flights of steps at the entrances to echoing buildings from bygone eras. Mostly, though, it was a realisation that libraries are places for people which need a human scale and to be welcoming as well as functional.

The concept of user-friendliness persisted and evolved. Designers and librarians are nowadays much better informed about processes and requirements. There is more consultation on library buildings than ever before. Before putting pencil to butter paper, or mouse to tablet, design consultants talk with librarians and building managers. Then everyone talks with the real clients, or representative client groups. Teens can help plan teen areas; children can road-test prototypes; access committees can check accessibility from plan to completion; staff, who will have to live and work in the final building, can have their say. There is real ownership of the process, whether there are focus groups, public presentations, surveys of some kind or a combination of approaches.

And guess what? Users, and non-users and those I call 'lapsed users', love the results. They just love their new or refurbished libraries. Just read what some of them say in the accompanying articles. 'I wish I could move in here', said one. 'Clean, green and serene' to a rap rhythm, is the reaction of another person, inspired by their new library.

I've always reckoned that if we don't create — and maintain — libraries which people take to their hearts and love, we can all pack up and go home. And by 'libraries' I mean the collections, the services, the

staff — the 'people experience' — not just the building and its decor. Judging by the sample of libraries showcased in this issue, we won't be packing up for a long time yet.

Here are libraries which are raising the bar, whether in ecologically sustainable development or in degrees of customer satisfaction. They are places where someone has gone to the trouble to work out what people want and how buildings can work with people — not against them.

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There are valuable lessons to be learned from the retail environment and in this issue Kevin Hennah offers some of his great insights into what libraries can effectively gain from their commercial cousins. Hamilton Wilson shares some of his knowledge and observations of user behaviour. Are people in the library for quiet reflection? Noisy distraction? Cool communication? Well, of course at one time or another, they are there for all that and more besides, as he describes.

So you design for overall higher ambient noise, and include especially quiet areas where they are needed. You create spaces for the way people like to study, or interact, or just veg out. There are areas where food and drink is not verboten. There's formal seating, casual seating and sometimes — according to youth and preference — just the floor.

Often there is public and community art to link the people with the very fabric of the place — not just an afterthought, when someone notices a blank wall or an odd nook or cranny. Art works can integrate with the design and even form part of the structure of the building.

Well, new and refurbished buildings do work. Imagine tripling your loan statistics, tripling your Internet access hours, tripling

the number of visitors, winning over new people and reinforcing the already broadening community view of the library.

Research is confirming things which we have felt intuitively or believed fervently. Libraries do have a special place in the heart of their communities, in cities, towns, rural settlements, on school or university campuses, or within parent organisations. They represent social capital, they are places where people want to go, but also, as local and overseas studies are showing, they are a significant return on investment in economic terms.

In the examples depicted in this issue it is refreshing to see such a variety of responses to different needs and clienteles. They range from stunning civic sentinels standing proudly next to commercial mega-centres, to information commons in academic libraries providing new degrees of freedom and flexibility for students. Elsewhere libraries rub shoulders with sibling institutions, in co-located premises, where library, museum and gallery goes, or gym or swimming centre patrons mingle and coalesce as a community. Each has its own character and its own appeal to its community.

Remarkable too is the way in which many buildings open themselves up to their environments: bringing an outlook into the library, as well as revealing the library to the passer-by. The metamorphosis of an existing university library building, described in this issue, is an outstanding example of what can actually be done with an old library which is solid enough and big enough — provided you have the right team at work to conceive, plan and design it.

The stories and the pictures tell part of the story, and there is a lot we can learn. Look and read, then visit and talk to some of the library staff about their new buildings. Many of them have won awards. All should I believe win that coveted award: the Order of the Satisfied Customer. And as we know, the customer is always right.

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