

OPINION

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Libraries: maintaining a role in the digital world

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By Design's Janne Ryan spoke with architecture critic Elizabeth Farrelly and architect Tone Wheeler about the powerful connection between knowledge and the design of libraries. As the digital world changes our lives, so too do the design of our libraries and their role. Are they still important?

The upper wing of the Mitchell Library is, as architect Tone Wheeler describes it, "the traditional idea of a library".

It's here that the massive skylight towers over the card indexes, and where studious researchers sit quietly at large communal tables surrounded by piles and piles of books.

Sydney's main public library has its own octagonal reading room, and both echo the function if not the design of iconic spaces in the great libraries – the British Library Reading Room and Trinity College Library in Dublin.

"I think this is one of the best rooms in Sydney, possibly one of the best rooms I know in Australia," says architecture critic Elizabeth Farrelly. "I love it for its 'libraryness' but also for its 'roomness', the shape and the quality and the sense of an ideas space."

I'm taking Ms Farrelly and Mr Wheeler on a tour of the library, and we're trying to discover how these traditional spaces might function in a new digital age, where the books on the walls are all digitised and accessible from home.

"[W]hen you see libraries where books were written... I think that's the thing about the British Library when you go in the British Museum and you see there is a corner devoted to all the works that Karl Marx referred to in that library when he was writing and researching there," Mr Wheeler says. "There's a sense of the ideas being made evident and you can see it, and I think that's the thing about seeing rows and rows and rows of books, the wealth of human endeavour in all of its spines all showing to you in all the different colours. There's a sense of the grandeur about that and that's matched by the grandeur of this room."

Grandeur is evoked not just by the books and history, but by the architecture itself. Libraries, like other 'essential' municipal buildings such as schools and hospitals, have traditionally been designed to elicit a certain feeling. But can that design purpose, and that feeling, survive a change of function?

"[W]e now start to think of the book as an endangered species, so the question of the library and the future of the library also comes into play," Ms Farrelly says. "And if you talk to librarians now they'll talk as if the future library is terribly exciting -- but it's really a kind of combination of community party space, and computer room with internet. And you think, well, everybody has already got their own computers, so what

is it actually, this thing? Maybe it's a whole lot of comfortable chairs with some sort of decorative books around."

"That ancient tradition which started with Alexandria, where the books weren't even replicated, they were original copies, [in those libraries] they were terribly precious," she says. "And as [books] got printed and replicated and then digitised, the sense of specialness has disappeared. Now... no one would build a three-storey, galleried, glass-ceilinged, vaulted space."

With the idea of books changing from something 'precious', to something replicated and common, to something potentially worthless, our sense of knowledge as belonging to books is beginning to fade. Mr Wheeler says that this change in how information is stored has altered both the role of books and of readers in modern libraries. The process of change started well before the internet though, with the introduction of public lending.

"I think once you start lending them [books] out they're no longer inside the vault and therefore I think you dissipate the notion of going to the library to read or to find what you've got," Mr Wheeler says. "And I think that's the start of this change. Many people would think it's a downward trend; I think it's just rapid change."

Most libraries are designed to accommodate the dual purpose of book repository (the stack) and reading room, and it's challenging to rethink what these two areas could be re-purposed towards, Mr Wheeler says.

"I think probably the clearest one of those is Ken Woolley's version for Sydney University, where the stack was a concrete structure then clad in bronze on the outside of it, and that was all very vertical.

And next to that is a horizontal building with glass all the way around, fantastic views looking back at the city and places to sit where you read. So that was the perfect evocation of the book on one side and the reader on the other."

Ms Farrelly is less sanguine, and worries about the future of the stack as a space where students can wander through and dream about books and knowledge.

"The space in the stack [at Sydney University Library] was so beautiful," she says. "I mean, you walked on those wire floors, so you could actually read that sense of the whole vertical connection of the space which was lovely, and it was like... it always used to remind me, although it wasn't really like it, of that Borges story of the infinite library, where the library is a metaphor for the universe, and it's actually quite Kafkaesque because the library ends up being meaningless and all the books are free of content and you can't get anywhere. I actually think it is a downward trend, I think the loss of beauty is always a downward trend."

But in transforming from a 'church of books' to a different kind of public spiritual place, the library doesn't necessarily have to lose its function as a place of beauty, contemplation and community, Mr Wheeler says.

"We're talking about a modern church being much more

about people singing and coming together as a community, and I think that's what the library now wants to be," he says. "The library can't stand alone now. Take the Surrey Hills Library in Sydney, the library itself is down underground, with computers, and above that is a big community reading room and above that a childcare centre. It's almost as if the library can't stand alone anymore. It needs a number of other things to assist it."

However, in new libraries like the Surry Hills Library in Sydney where the books are underground, does the design have less authority? And if so, what element of design has taken away that authority?

"I think to some extent Tone's right, the borrowable nature of books makes them seem less special," Ms Farrelly says. "And that sort of municipal library plastic-covered, dog-eared book that you get is less impressive as a tome than the books that I saw recently, for example, in the Hunterian Library, which is the Royal College of Surgeons library in Lincoln's Inn Fields in London, which is a very tall room like this one, but with those lovely full-height windows with reveals, which are about a metre deep of the windows, [and] are actually book lined."

"There's no way you go in there and have a conversation," she says. "You go in there and it immediately says to you 'treat

it with respect". There is definitely a power relationship, and the room is running the show, the consumer is not in charge. And modern consumers find that quite uncomfortable I think."

That charge, though, could potentially be made of most modern architecture, not just libraries, Ms Farrelly concedes.

"Architecture doesn't even want authority anymore, architecture wants celebrity," she says. "Everybody wants to be a Bilbao, nobody wants to be dignified and serious and respected. They just want to be admired and loved and read about. So it's all about the wildly weird front-page picture. Most architecture is after that single image and it's certainly not an interior image, it's always the picture of the form, which is ironic, we're back to outright formalism, which is kind of interesting, like the end of 19th century formalism. So we're due for a revolution here I think."

Janne Ryan spoke with Elizabeth Farrelly and Tone Wheeler at the Mitchell Library, part of the State Library of New South Wales.

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