

# THE SAGE ON FORM AND FUNCTION

**T**he sage, Falia, recently returned to the Delphic abode on Mount Dewey after a long, in-depth international fact-finding mission. Although Falia could have googled the information, she decided that real-time experience was essential even if it meant suffering the indignity of travelling business class. What prompted this huge self-sacrifice?

For decades every fourth question put to the sage concerned the qualities of great library design. She had answered enquiries ranging from renovation to the conversion of buildings not wanted by anyone else. The most frequent query concerned the design of new buildings. Her supplicants invariably expressed their needs in hackneyed expressions –

wow factor, state-of-the-art, test of time, ultimate standard. Most also wanted the most elusive item of knowledge – the name of the best architect.

The sage knew from long experience that form and function are two of the defining factors associated with planning a library building. Her extensive global tour took her to numerous great libraries built in the pre-digital age. Almost all had an ecclesiastical aura. They had been designed as temples of learning to emphasise the sacredness of the collections, to awe the uninitiated, to cocoon the cognoscenti and to provide safe repositories for knowledge.

In London, the sage revisited the former British Library reading room located at the British Museum. She was awed and humbled again by the soaring dome and was delighted to sit where Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf and other luminaries had sat. The sage recalled being at the opening in 1857 when the reading room was proclaimed a successful marriage of architectural form and library function.

The marriage lasted for 140 years but the union became increasingly rocky. While the form remained constant, the library function had evolved and change was essential. An expensive black cab ride took the sage to the current home of the British Library. It has some grand features but its internal design pays homage more to function than awe-inspiring form. This has enabled space designed for one function to be repurposed to meet emerging needs.



On her way back to Australia, the sage dropped in at St Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai. Even after six centuries, the library form continues to match its function. It is a great library due to its collection rather than its architecture. The sage also visited some of the vast new university libraries in China. Most have been designed on a monumental scale, often by Western architects. The libraries demonstrate the nation’s drive for modernity and progress, as well as a need to accommodate huge student numbers and large book collections. The digital age has made them somewhat anachronistic as the book collections will not be amassed and the re-adaptation of the space may not be easy. As buildings, they will shift from the ‘great’ category to the ‘utilitarian’ subclass.

Before returning to her lofty abode, the sage made quick visits to some favourite local libraries. Yes, Australia has its share of libraries built as temples to knowledge. The classical architecture and dramatic atmosphere at the La Trobe Reading Room at the State Library of Victoria continue to impress. A short limousine ride took the sage to the Melbourne Docklands Library. This architecturally impressive and futuristic building may well be the epitome of a more temporal worship of knowledge. Contemplating both libraries, the sage wondered whether such acclaimed edifices can meet the functional needs of future users. Being wise, enigmatic and business savvy, the sage has decided to retain that information as commercial-in-confidence.

Many of the libraries visited during the sage’s tour were clearly the result of architects, interior designers, facility managers

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and librarians mixing their wisdom, experience and egos. Some even had user input in the mixture.

In the sage's experience, architects and interior designers often present the greatest challenge to good library design. Their primary concern is the form of the building and its aesthetics. These considerations are sometimes at variance with the functional needs of the library service. Australia is fortunate in having a number of architects and designers who understand the need to balance form and function in library design. No amount of cajoling will entice the sage to name them but they are the ones who have worked on at least three libraries for three different clients. Their buildings are likely to stand the test of time and the functional changes that will occur in the future.

Scattered throughout the world, however, are countless libraries designed with form as the overriding objective. They may look great, perhaps even impressive, and some may be thought amazing. Yet step inside and look past the lofty foyer, the multistorey atrium, the trendy décor or the expansive marble trim. It is quickly apparent that these are spaces intended to promote the reputations of their designers rather than facilitate library services. Library activities continue to function in these monumental spaces but often they are like cuckoos in another bird's nest.

Her extensive research has convinced the sage that good library design balances architectural form and library function. Great library design, however, has the scale tipped toward


function and librarians have to influence the balance. An architecturally stunning building may be admired forever, but it will be just a pretty shell if there is no pearl inside. Pearls require particular ecosystems in order to thrive and in the case of libraries, that is more than a stunning architectural shell.

John Shipp

**PS** ALIA, through its Australian Public Library Alliance, has announced its intention to launch public library design awards in 2016, and the first presentations will take place in 2017.


Categories will include new buildings, redevelopments and refurbishments, providing the opportunity to showcase smaller and larger library services.

The awards will recognise investments by local councils, state and territory governments.


It is hoped that the awards will be extended to other types of libraries following the introduction of this program to recognise outstanding public library design. 



JOHN SHIPP, FALIA  
ALIA President



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