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**People Places: the New South Wales Public Library Network**

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**Setting the scene**

This joint paper aims to give an overview of the development of the relationship between the State Library of New South Wales (NSW) and the New South Wales Public Library Network up to present time, with a look into the future. The State Library is a NSW government body, and the NSW Public Library Network includes public libraries run by local government authorities. The relationship was formally established with the 1939 NSW Library Act and has spanned sixty-five years. In working together the two spheres of government (state and local) can look with pride at a thriving, dynamic public library network serving the people of NSW.

**State Library of New South Wales**

The State Library is one of the oldest libraries in Australia, with a history tracing back to the establishment of the Australian Subscription Library in 1826. In 1869 the NSW Government took responsibility for the Library, forming the “Free Public Library, Sydney”, the first truly public library service for the people of New South Wales. In 1895 the name was changed to the Public Library of New South Wales and in 1975 to the State Library of New South Wales.

The Library is the major public reference and information service for the people of New South Wales and beyond. The State Library collection is a

nationally significant resource with a collection of over five million items, including books, journals, newspapers, government publications, maps, pictures, manuscripts, ephemera, oral histories and audiovisual materials. Special materials for people with a disability, and resources in 43 community languages are also acquired.<sup>1</sup>

The Mitchell Library, the world-renowned research collection relating to Australia and especially New South Wales is part of the State Library. The collection contains over 800,000 items and is based on the collection of David Scott Mitchell, Australia's greatest collector of Australiana. The collection continues to grow and is used for both historical and contemporary research.<sup>2</sup>

The State Library's partnership with the NSW public library network is articulated in the State Library's Corporate Strategy. The State Library aims to:

*strengthen the identity and effectiveness of the NSW public library network, comprising NSW public libraries and the State Library.*<sup>3</sup>

### **Library Council of New South Wales**

The Library Council of New South Wales is the governing body of the State Library. The objectives of the Library Council, as defined in section 4A of the *Library Act 1939* are to:

- promote, provide and maintain library and information services for the people of New South Wales through the State Library and through cooperation with local libraries and information agencies,
- advise the Minister (*currently the Minister for the Arts, who is also the Premier, or Chief Minister, of NSW*), local authorities and, when the Minister so approves, other bodies, on matters of policy and administration relating to library services and information services that are or may be provided through local libraries and other libraries, and
- advise the Minister on the provision of assistance to local libraries or other libraries.<sup>4</sup>

### **Public Libraries Consultative Committee (PLCC)**

The Public Libraries Consultative Committee is the subcommittee of Library Council with principal responsibility for providing policy advice to Council with regards to NSW public library matters. The Committee provides a consultative framework for the Library Council, the State Library and key stakeholders in local government concerning public library services in New South Wales.<sup>5</sup>

### **Cooperation with local libraries**

The Library Act was passed by the New South Wales Parliament in 1939 to encourage and support the development of New South Wales libraries. It

came at a time when there was great concern about the lack of library services available to the people of New South Wales.<sup>6</sup> As Mr D H Drummond, the Minister for Education and a country resident said when the Library Bill was being discussed in Parliament:

*... the Government felt it incumbent to bring down this measure for several reasons. One of those reasons was that the grave inadequacy of library provision and organisation in New South Wales had been shown so clearly by the various inquiries that had been made that it was desirable at the earliest possible moment to introduce a measure that would enable the defects of that organisation to be remedied.*<sup>7</sup>

Mr Drummond further stated:

*It [the Bill] introduces to this State an entirely new principle in library organisation, the principle of State and local government co-operation, financial and otherwise.*<sup>8</sup>

The first step for New South Wales local authorities to receive State Government financial assistance for the provision of public library services is the adoption of the *Library Act 1939*. All local authorities have adopted the Act by resolution of the local authority, or by vote of electors at a poll, the last being in 1992.

### **The New South Wales Public Library Network**

The New South Wales Public Library Network (NSWPLN) comprises the State Library of NSW and local public libraries across the state. The library services include a mixture of independent (or standalone) library services operated by a single local authority and regional libraries where up to 12 local authorities have entered into an agreement to provide a regional service under sections 11 and 12 of the *Library Act 1939*.

While the State Library is responsible for administering the *Library Act 1939*, which places some requirements on local government, local authorities and their library services are autonomous. The majority of funding for public libraries is provided by local government. NSW local authorities spent \$217,251,283 on public library services in 2002/03.<sup>9</sup> The Act does provide for State Government assistance to public libraries in NSW by way of grants, subsidies and other support. There is no direct recurrent financial assistance to public libraries by the Federal Government.

In 2004/05 State Government funding of \$22,421,550 was provided to support local government provision of public library services under the following programs:

- Subsidy – funds that are available under the *Library Act 1939* in support the provision of free library services by local authorities.

- Special Purpose Grants – project funding received by all local authorities for collections, buildings, technology, promotion and/or research.
- Library Development Grants – a competitive program where project funding of up to \$200,000 is available. Library Development Grants are by application and assessed by the Library Council of NSW Grants Committee in conjunction with State Library staff. Each year local authorities submit up to 100 applications requesting between 4 and 7 million dollars in grants. In 2004/05 \$3.3 million was allocated under the Grants program.<sup>10</sup>
- Cooperative and Networking activities - funds administered by the State Library on behalf of public libraries for the development of the Network. In 2004/05 these activities included professional development courses, the public library statistics database, the cooperative purchase of multicultural library materials and research into public libraries to promote the value and impact of public libraries and contribute to future development.

### **State Library services to the public library network**

In addition to the support that the State Government provides directly to local authorities, twenty-five per cent of all State Library activities support public libraries. The range of services is illustrated in *Libraries for Life: your place, your time*.<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of this paper a selection of services are highlighted.

### **Public Library Services division**

The Public Library Services division provides strategic leadership and advice on all aspects of public library provision, control and management to the local authorities, public libraries, the State Library and other State and Federal Government agencies. Library Council's objects with regard to public libraries are managed and coordinated by the division.

With responsibility for monitoring local government compliance with the Library Act 1939 and reviewing and recommending changes to the Act and Library Regulation the division has significant influence on public library policy and service delivery across NSW. Divisional staff review and draft guidelines and policies for funding allocation and public library service provision and consult with key stakeholders when preparing issues papers and policy statements.

Policies and guidelines that have been issued include public library website guidelines, the free Internet access policy and the guidelines for public library buildings titled *People Places* which David Jones will cover in more detail.<sup>12</sup>

The division provides specialised advisory services on all aspects of public library services through a team of highly skilled professional librarians.

Advisory services include specific onsite consultations and management and/or service reviews. An example is the review of the services and facilities of the Bega Valley Shire Library in the south east of the State, some 450 kilometres south of Sydney.

The Bega Valley Library Manager believes that the State Library review gave the library a strong opportunity to build its profile within the local authority and to develop long term strategies for the future. As a result of the positive impact of the review a joint paper was written by the Bega Valley Library Manager and one of the State Library reviewers and presented to the 2004 Country Public Libraries Association Conference.<sup>13</sup>

The division manages a professional development program for public library staff to support the development of the network. Professional development courses have a strong management focus and include leadership development, succession planning, grant writing, strategic planning, library building projects, etc. With 2,300 staff in NSW public libraries and limited funding available the courses are usually oversubscribed and waiting lists are not uncommon.

Public Library Services collects, collates and distributes public library statistical and performance data. Until 1973 the financial and statistical information was only published in the annual report of the Library Council of NSW, formerly the Library Board of NSW. In response to requests from local authorities and libraries to facilitate comparison between library services, the Board issued more detailed financial and statistical information relating to metropolitan libraries as a pilot publication in 1973.<sup>14</sup> The response was so positive that country libraries were included in 1974.<sup>15</sup> The most recent issue of *Public Library Statistics* is 2002/03.

The statistical information has been collected via a paper survey over recent years. Statistical data for the 2003/04 financial year will be collected online using the Bibliostat software. A state wide licence has been purchased on behalf of all NSW public libraries and local authorities to collect and collate the required financial and statistical information. Further development is required before the online collection and collation of the financial data from more than 150 local authorities is introduced.

The division leads and manages activities and projects, including a program of research relevant to libraries, that help to position, promote and develop the public library network.<sup>16</sup> Activities that support the promotion of the network include publishing *Public Library News*<sup>17</sup> three times a year with a monthly electronic *Public Library News Update*<sup>18</sup> and hosting the website for the NSW promotional campaign developed around the American Library Association @ your library® trademark.

Research projects that have been completed include *A safe place to go: libraries and social capital*, *Culturally diverse communities and the public library*, and *Local history in public libraries*.<sup>19</sup> Currently underway is a project that is investigating the role public libraries play in supporting eGovernment initiatives and under development is a project to measure the value of public libraries.<sup>20</sup>

## NSW.net

In late 1996 access to the Internet across public libraries in NSW was extremely fragmented. An audit conducted by the State Library found that 65 of the then 97 central public libraries had access to the Internet, using 34 different Internet Service Providers (ISPs). All 65 public libraries, with the exception of three, were connecting to the Internet using a modem. The remaining three were using ISDN connections.

In the large metropolitan areas of Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong broadband connections to the Internet were more generally available. In remote and rural areas of the State it was a very different story. The majority of libraries were using dial-up connections, connection costs were up to A\$25 per hour and the download time was so long that people would make a cup of tea while they waited for the information to arrive. In addition, many of the country telephone exchanges were not set up for broadband connections.

The State Library and the Public Libraries Consultative Committee (PLCC) saw equity of access as a major issue for public libraries and could see that unless action was taken public libraries would fall behind in the delivery of online information and services. Therefore, the Committee recommended to the Library Council that \$1,315,000 of additional State Government funding for public libraries be used to develop the *Networking Public Libraries* project between 1997 and 1999.

In 1997 the project, renamed NSW.net, was underway and focusing on ensuring that country libraries and country residents obtained equitable access to online services; and providing affordable, unlimited, untimed access irrespective of where the library and its clients were located in NSW. In 1998 capital funding of \$8.5 million was made available over four years (2000 to 2003) by the present Premier of NSW, the Hon. Bob Carr.

NSW.net provides councils, libraries and their communities with subsidised access to the Internet, free or discounted access to quality online databases, and has provided over 700 public access Internet terminals to public libraries in NSW, to ensure that people across the State have free Internet access. NSW.net is a state-wide communications infrastructure designed to facilitate both cost effective access to the Internet and sharing of information for public libraries, local government and local communities in NSW.<sup>21</sup>

At present sixty five local authorities, serving 136 public libraries, are connected to the NSW.net terrestrial and 2-way satellite network. All public libraries have access to the free online databases.

Following the early success of NSW.net, the State Library successfully sought \$3.99 million in Federal Government funding through the *Networking the Nation* program to provide broadband access to selected public libraries and organisations in small rural communities throughout NSW which would otherwise not gain such access in the foreseeable future.<sup>22</sup>

The project, called *Rural Link*, originated from the recognition that for many towns ISDN connectivity was unavailable or too expensive. Rural Link provides sustainable, high speed Internet and online access to at least 184 buildings (including 47 public libraries) in 74 small rural and remote towns across NSW. The one-way satellite provides 400 kbit/s bandwidth out from the satellite, and 64 kbit/s back via ISDN.<sup>23</sup>

However, the work is by no means finished. There remain a number of public libraries still using dial-up services and while dial-up is readily available it is no longer considered adequate for library user needs. NSW.net has an ongoing program of improving Internet connectivity to libraries using dial-up connections and/or upgrading the identified libraries to broadband connections and pilot trials are currently underway.

NSW.net is also trialling 2-way satellite Internet technology to find a technical and cost effective Internet access solution for mobile library services. Virtually all the NSW mobile libraries are located in rural areas and many of these areas have poor telecommunications infrastructure. The mobile nature of the service poses additional problems that need to be overcome.

Due to the outstanding success of the State Library's NSW.net project the State Government provided \$2 million in additional recurrent Public Libraries Grants & Subsidies funding from 2003/04 for the ongoing provision of services.

### **Building and Planning Advisory Service**

Dr David Jones, Principal of the Building and Planning Advisory Service, provides assistance on all aspects of planning and designing library buildings: assessing space requirements, deciding on sites, preparing design briefs and troubleshooting during building projects. The challenge of physical infrastructure merits closer examination and David will be addressing this later in our presentation.

### **Multicultural services for NSW public libraries**

The State of New South Wales is one of the most culturally diverse communities in Australia. People from around 140 birthplaces have made the State their home and around 26% of the population speak a language other than English at home.

The State Library provides access to its own multicultural services and collections and also provides leadership and support to all NSW public libraries offering multicultural library services. The Public Library Services division Multicultural Consultant has a specific responsibility to promote multicultural library services in NSW public libraries and to develop policies on multicultural issues for the State Library.

The Consultant works closely with the Working Group on Multicultural Library Services (NSW) to support the development of library collections and

services.<sup>24</sup> Projects include the highly successful campaign to promote multicultural library services. In a first for library services in New South Wales, an extensive marketing campaign was developed to promote the wide range of public library services offered to non-English speaking communities.<sup>25</sup> The Consultant also coordinates cultural awareness and transliteration training for public library staff.

The State Library collects and catalogues library materials in community languages for loan to public library clients. This back-up collection is provided as most rural and regional, and some metropolitan, libraries cannot sustain community language collections as the cost is prohibitive due to a small multicultural population. Over recent years the number of languages has increased as has the items held and loans from the collection.

Year	Number of languages	Items held	Loans
2001/02	41	69,441	74,000
2002/03	42	67,698	76,305
2003/04	43	72,697	80,608*

**\* 111% turnover**

To support the development of multicultural library services an intensive research program has been managed by the State Library on behalf of the network over recent years. The first project was a comprehensive survey of multicultural service delivery in NSW public libraries. The 2001 research report, *Multicultural library services in New South Wales*, documented the existing public library services and included examples of local, national and international service delivery that could provide models for libraries wishing to improve multicultural library service delivery.<sup>26</sup>

The second project was a review of multicultural library services to identify library visitor needs and to map opportunities for wider engagement of non-English speaking background audiences. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were held in-language with representatives from ten community language groups (Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Korean, Macedonian, Punjabi, Russian, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese). A survey was also undertaken of library staff who work with multicultural library clients.

The third project that is currently underway is a review of the Multicultural Purchasing Cooperative (MPC). The Cooperative was established in the 1970s to source and supply library materials at the lowest price by way of bulk orders and discounts. Currently 25 library services throughout the State, with most located in Sydney, purchase materials through the Cooperative. In 2003/04 31,821 items were purchased in 40 languages at a total cost of A\$607,384. This was a significant increase on 2002/03 when 6,624 items were purchased in 31 languages at a total cost of \$381,048.

The MPC coordinates the selection of materials by distributing catalogues to libraries and organising combined selection meetings. Selection meetings are held for languages where more than four libraries will be buying. Each year

more than 10 selection meetings are held in approximately 15 languages. The Cooperative undertakes all supplier liaison, ordering, invoicing and distribution associated with the subsequent purchases. More recently the Cooperative has coordinated cataloguing of multicultural materials in response to requests for ways of achieving more cost effective cataloguing. In 2003/04 12,894 items were catalogued through the Cooperative.

### **Services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People**

The State Library is committed to improving library services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in New South Wales through the provision of appropriate services from the State Library and to with the public library network to provide appropriate services throughout the State.

The State Library has signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of Technology, Sydney Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning (IHL), and plans to hold a colloquium on Indigenous issues in December 2004.

Over the past three months an audit has been undertaken of the services offered by public libraries that specifically target Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The audit is the starting point for a larger research project planned for 2005 that will focus on broader issues of non-use of public libraries to identify needs and provide strategic directions for the development of library services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Professor N. M. Nakata, Jumbunna IHL, provides advice to the State Library on research relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.<sup>27</sup>

### **Travelling exhibitions**

The State Library has a strong exhibitions program and each year arranges for elements of one of the exhibitions to be toured to NSW public libraries. The selected exhibition is redesigned to be displayed on 10 large fold-out panels that fit into an aluminium travelling case. Previous travelling exhibitions have been *The Summer Game* (cricket), *Shifting Ground* (Antarctica), *The Ultimate Voyage* (Matthew Flinders) and *Miles Franklin: a brilliant career?* (literature).

With each travelling exhibition the State Library Curator responsible for assembling the exhibition travels to select public library locations to present the exhibition. Both the travelling exhibitions and the Curator presentations have proved very popular with library visitors. We see this program as a very positive way of bringing some of the richness of the State Library collections to people who might never have the opportunity to visit the Library in Sydney. Because of their popularity two exhibitions will travel this year and *A magnificent spectacle* (theatre posters) will be joining Miles Franklin on tour.<sup>28</sup>

## **Libraries as a fusion space**

NSW local public libraries facilitate social cohesion. They are one of the few public services that are available to the entire community without exception. They provide public meeting places and shared spaces that are welcoming, accepting and safe. In many rural, regional and remote communities the public library is one of the last, if not the last, community service and meeting place that is available to everyone. Public libraries are well established and recognised community hubs that offer insurance against the information and digital divides.

## **Social capital**

Those in the library business know that libraries are fusion spaces and places; however, there is growing evidence of this knowledge. The 2000 social capital study commissioned by the State Library (*A safe place to go*) found that libraries act as a communal gathering place, where many diverse members of society can feel relaxed in each other's company.

Following the publication of the NSW research a major social capital research project was developed in Victoria and is expected to be completed in October this year. The *Libraries Building Communities* project has been undertaken to identify and showcase how public libraries in Victoria do build their communities, what the potential barriers to this process might be, and how they can be overcome.<sup>29</sup>

## **Multicultural library services**

Participants in the recent review of multicultural library services mentioned above confirmed the importance of the public library to people from a non-English speaking background (NESB). The research confirmed that multicultural library services are highly valued by NESB library users. This resonates with the 1995 national survey of users and non-users of state and public libraries which established that the library is an institution with a high access and equity rating for women, the aged, young people, non-English speaking background Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.<sup>30</sup>

## **Outback Letterbox Library**

With the closure or downgrading of many social services, together with the introduction of the user-pays principle, many libraries have taken on the role of a focal point for communities. This has particular application in rural communities which are generally more cohesive and have a tradition of helping each other out and working together for the good of the community, for example coming together to fight bushfires or to help in floods. Even the most isolated communities have some level of access to library services and in less dangerous times it is here that they come together.

A unique example of a public library service to isolated communities is the Outback Letterbox Library service operated by Broken Hill Library and funded by the Library Council of NSW. This service has been delivering library materials and services to the isolated community of the far west of NSW since 1977. The service delivers books and other library materials by mail to people sparsely scattered over some 25% of the State. Clients of the service live many kilometres from their closest townships and in extreme instances may live up to 500 kilometres from their closest library.

Without the Outback Letterbox Library isolated residents of the region would have no access to a public library. However, the people living in the far reaches (outback) of the State are very gradually being connected to the Outback Letterbox Library service by electronic means. Some now have Internet connections, or access to the Internet, and they can select their materials via the Broken Hill Library online catalogue. In addition, if they need information quickly they can ring, fax or email Broken Hill with their request.<sup>31</sup> Those who use the Outback Letterbox Library made the following comments in response to a survey:

- *I'd be lost without the service.*
- *I've always been excited about receiving my green library bag.*
- *Thank heaven for the Library. I feel so fortunate to be able to access it. The books help to spend time and relax in our shrinking community.*
- *Only my husband and myself live on the property these days ... he often reads my books...*
- *We have been retrenched due to the drought so are returning to Brisbane. I'd like to thank you for the wonderful service over the past 10 years.*

### **Future directions for the NSW Public Library Network**

There are many challenges that State and Local Government face in looking to further develop NSW public libraries, with funding being perhaps the most challenging. In NSW there are three key organisations that lobby for additional funding for public libraries. They are the Country Public Libraries Association of NSW, the Metropolitan Public Libraries Association, NSW and the Local Government and Shires Associations of NSW.<sup>32</sup>

The Associations are represented on the Public Libraries Consultative Committee (PLCC) along with Library Council and State Library and Local Government Managers representatives. The close working relationship between these key stakeholders has been a great strength and has provided positive support to the ongoing development of the network. The quality of the relationship can perhaps be best illustrated by the high level of consensus in recent years for the allocation of additional State Government funds to priority areas.

Another challenge is keeping abreast of the technical developments: the ongoing regime of upgrading library management systems, the never ending call for more PCs for the public areas; and the RFID technology that appeals

to so many but can only be put on the wish list. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges will be the sheer amount of information that library users will want to download and the impact that will have on libraries.<sup>33</sup>

Local government reform in New South Wales will continue to impact on the public library network over the next few years. Recently there have been amalgamations and boundary changes, primarily in country NSW, which has seen the number of local authorities reduced from 172 to 154. These changes are having a significant impact upon the management of some regional library services. In addition, under the State Government funding arrangements for public libraries the amalgamations and boundary changes bring a reduction in the level of State funding. Managing these and other issues associated with local government reform will be a priority for the State Library and public libraries for some time to come.

The Network will also face both an internal and an external challenge over the next 5-10 years relating to the age of the population. Many library managers and senior library staff will retire over this period and at the same time the number of people over 55 years of age in NSW will increase markedly.<sup>34</sup>

In the past retiring library managers were often replaced by their deputies who were very experienced and had usually acted in the manager's job each year when they were on leave. Now that local government has embraced flat work structures deputies have been largely replaced by multiple team leaders. While experienced many do not have the opportunity each year to work in the manager's position and build that invaluable experience. It is for this reason that the State Library professional development courses focus on leadership and management.

The challenge of the large number of baby boomers retiring is that many will look to library services to provide a more diverse level of services targeting their age group and will generally be more demanding. In addition, as the percentage of people in this age range increases there will be additional demands for large print and talking books. Home library services will be particularly affected. Developing services for older persons will require additional focus over the next few years for libraries in the network to be better prepared.

### **Where to from here?**

Despite ongoing predictions of their demise, public libraries are as relevant today as they ever were. Securing significant additional funding for public library services is an ongoing goal but it doesn't get in the way of moving ahead. In the near future the State Library will have implemented a content management system and totally redeveloped its website. This will mean that information and services delivered through the website for public librarians will be much more accessible.

The next few years might see the maturation of ideas that have been on the drawing board for quite a few years but have not yet be realised. One is a statewide library card which NSW residents could use in any public library.

There are still the issues of funding, privacy, technical solutions etc to be addressed; however, the idea will be kept alive as it is an inevitable network development. A higher level of cooperation between public library services seems to be the way of the future. Increasingly library services consider the advantages of jointly contracting for new library management systems, or for the purchase of library materials. Some models already exist, for example Shorelink and the South Coast Cooperative, which provide strong evidence of the benefits of cooperative ventures.<sup>35</sup>

And finally, until it is officially announced I can only refer to a very exciting new model of online service delivery that will be tested, evaluated and implemented over the next nine months. Of the first suite of modules to be developed two will be of direct benefit to public library and local authority staff. In addition, the service model will have direct application to the provision of services in public libraries as well as in the State Library.

### **In conclusion**

To quote Mr C E Martin, member of the NSW State Government Legislative Assembly and member for Waverley who said in 1939:

*We believe that free public libraries are needed and are the right of the people. They are an essential educational service. They are and should be a really vital part of our intellectual life....*<sup>36</sup>

And to quote former Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong who said in 1993

*The future belongs to countries whose people make the most productive use of information, knowledge and technology.*<sup>37</sup>

### **Library buildings**

In this segment I would like to describe some of the major issues facing planners and designers in Australia when they begin to design the kinds of public library buildings we must have to meet current and future needs.

Today there are 392 public library buildings in New South Wales. All of them are the responsibility of the local government authorities. Local councils initiate and carry out library construction, mainly from their own finances.

The buildings range in size from under a hundred square metres to over 5,500 sq m. The State Library, by comparison, is about 37,000 sq m. The buildings vary as widely in shape as they do in size. Most are custom-built, although a significant number are in buildings that were constructed for a different purpose: a town hall, a department store, a church, a commercial office building, a school of arts, a supermarket. They may be standalone or part of a complex. They vary in age from just built to historic, the oldest living in a building dating from the early years of the 19th century.

At the moment the library building scene in Australia is a lively one. At a seminar in Sydney in February we counted about 50 recent, current or impending public library building projects in New South Wales alone. Our seminar has already stimulated some of those attending into action, just as many of us will be inspired by what we are seeing of Singapore's vibrant library system.

How are my colleagues back in New South Wales going about the planning process today? What issues are foremost in their minds when they start turning aspirations for a new building into reality, making dreams come true?

Ten years ago I would probably have answered along fairly conventional lines, perhaps citing Harry Faulkner-Brown's 'Ten Commandments'.<sup>38</sup> Today many of the planning and design principles which we once emphasised to architects and to our colleagues again and again have become so well accepted that we can (almost) take them for granted. There is every reason to believe that a competent architect and a well-informed library manager can together produce a workable library building. But that is no longer enough.

It seems to me, having observed library planning close-up for the past twenty years in Australia and elsewhere, that today there are three issues which dominate the planning and design of library buildings. If we get these right, we have a good chance of success.

### **User needs**

Anyone who has taken an interest in library buildings over the past few years will have witnessed their transformation from process- and collection-centred to people and services-focussed. We have seen a general recognition of libraries as hubs of their communities. At the State Library of New South Wales our research has emphasised the social role of the library which has also emerged in overseas studies.<sup>39</sup>

Meeting user needs is a paramount issue. User needs are the reason we are in business. They are more varied and more important than ever before. There has never been a one size fits all for library buildings, but today the variety of user needs for which we have to plan is greater than ever.

People are spending longer in libraries; in Australia on-site use is outstripping growth in loans. They want a pleasant environment; so we create spaces where they will feel comfortable – a lounge room in the city.

Many people want to converse with each other informally: noise levels are generally higher. Some want a room of their own where they can discuss, plan or argue: group study rooms and seminar rooms are now very common in public libraries.

Others just want a quiet area where they can concentrate: there may be a quiet study room, or a 'homework' room, or simply good layout and acoustics.

Users range from children in strollers to elderly people using walking frames or electric chairs. Australia's population is ageing and accessibility standards are becoming more and more stringent.

Australians come from all ethnic backgrounds and want to feel at home: community art and public art are sometimes integral to the design and are planned well beforehand – not just an afterthought. Some have special language requirements: this may mean multilingual signage or space for language learning.

They need access to computers (for which their appetite shows no abating), collections and expertise: good design makes everything approachable and as much as possible visible.

Some people need little assistance and are quite happy to help themselves: so logical layouts and good wayfinding are still important. Others need a lot of assistance. Some have special needs because of a disability: they may need technical aids as well as accessible design.

Most people now have high expectations, not just of libraries, but of services generally. They bring their experiences of other buildings – notably retail and entertainment – into the library with them. The need for visual appeal has led to a 'retail' approach in public libraries. Many lessons learned from supermarket design have been successfully applied to libraries.

At the State Library of New South Wales we have been very keen to help library managers and architects to identify and respond to these varied needs. In 2000 we issued *People places: a guide for public library buildings in New South Wales*.<sup>40</sup> When libraries are being planned, New South Wales councils are encouraged to apply the principles set out in our publication. Assessing user needs is its major theme, and it seems to be working. There is now more community consultation about library services going on at a local level than ever before and the public reception of post-*People places* buildings is very encouraging.

## **Space**

Space, and in this I include library sites as well as the internal spaces, is a critical issue in a number of ways.

First, the availability of suitable sites (or in the case of many metropolitan areas the lack of availability) has a major influence on design. Scarcity of land in Sydney has also encouraged local authorities to locate more than one facility on the same site. In the past it was common to see community facilities scattered all around the local government area. Local government, by the way, can own community halls, galleries, museums, baby health centres, meals on wheels services, youth clubs, senior citizens' centres, scout and guide halls, recreation centres, neighbourhood centres, childcare centres, as well as libraries.

Nowadays the possibility of co-location is examined very closely where circumstances permit. One complex can be easier to construct, secure and maintain than several. Sharing car parks, foyers or other common spaces can make economic sense. Co-located facilities may be more convenient for the community. They may also enable a wide variety of people visiting other facilities to be drawn into contact with the library on a regular basis. Co-location may mean symbiotic relationships. There may be a diversity of services with the community as the common core.

It is significant that co-location is bringing local government into cooperative arrangements with State Government — there is more than one example of a library sharing a building with a police station or an area health centre. The New South Wales Parliament is currently conducting an inquiry into joint use and co-location of local government facilities with State Government public buildings. Some of the success stories in co-location have involved libraries.

More and more libraries are popping up in shopping centres, often as a result of a deal between the local authority and a developer. Shopping centre owners are aware of the large numbers of people who come into libraries, and therefore their shopping centres, each day. We used to say that the best site for a public library was next to Woolworths. Nowadays it seems the best place for a Woolworths is next to the library.

Of course shopping centre space may be expensive and there is usually pressure to keep the size of 'mall' libraries to a minimum. They can nonetheless be very effective branch libraries, giving a taste of what is available at a larger central library, or catering for a particular target group within the community.

Land values are also encouraging local authorities to realise as fully as possible the potential of the sites which they own when they have to replace or upgrade community infrastructure. In New South Wales four very large civic renewal projects are currently on the drawing board – at Albury, Chatswood, Newcastle and Parramatta. These will involve the regeneration of entire city blocks with public libraries as major 'anchor tenants' in all four schemes. With at least one of these projects the need to replace or extend an outgrown library building was the starting point for the whole scheme.

In the research and consultation that led up to *People places* we examined the need for floor space very closely. We found no evidence that less space is needed. On the contrary we found that a variety of new functions demanded even more space. Growth areas include group study, training, volunteers, meetings and seminars, exhibitions and other public programmes, with some spaces accessible even when the library is closed.

Population growth, particularly in metropolitan areas, is adding to floor space requirements. Several projects under way at the moment are tripling the floor areas of the 1970s and 1980s buildings they are replacing.

Even with large increases in floor area, we are still looking to make the best use of space. Whenever possible spaces are designed for more than one function, accepting that some compromises in the performance of multifunction spaces may be necessary.

Realising the potential of available sites and making the most of the floor areas that can be afforded are certainly common themes in current public library planning in New South Wales.

## **Economics**

What can be afforded leads me, as you might expect, to economic factors.

Funding a new library building has never been easy. There is some assistance in new release areas — suburbs where major new housing developments are taking place — when new libraries are being built as part of the infrastructure. In New South Wales legislation provides that developers contribute funds to the local authority to help provide capital for infrastructure, including libraries. In areas where there is little new building going on, funding is much more difficult. The cost of land and competition for sites with retail and commercial developments compound the difficulty. Funding is also very difficult in some rural areas, where the local government area may be affected by a low rate base, by drought, by declining populations and by rising costs.

It is all the more remarkable that, despite these inauspicious circumstances, library buildings are booming. This is a tribute to local library champions within the community and among elected representatives, as well as to committed library managers. The importance of the library is acknowledged. There may be vigorous debates about where the library should be located and what it should look like. But few people will argue that the library building is not needed, even when funds are scarce.

So far there has been little need to show the cost of **not** constructing a new library. We could point to the social and economic cost of the lack of community infrastructure. Rather we have emphasised the benefits which we know new or extended libraries can provide.

Interest in construction and commissioning costs of new libraries has meant much more intensive scrutiny of designs. Closer attention is paid to preliminary planning and design briefs, with greater use made of specialist consultants. Value management is sometimes applied to the design. There is usually a focus upon the overall sustainability of the library.

Local government authorities have adopted the principles of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) and this is reflected in many new library designs. The life-cycle cost of a building is examined much more frequently than before, not just the cost of construction.

Economic benefits of co-location were mentioned earlier. Some local authorities are able to include a revenue-generating component in a development, such as a cafe, bookshop or gymnasium.

Rising staff costs are also having an impact on design in several ways. Self service and automation of routine tasks are being adopted in the larger libraries, to enable stable staff numbers to serve growing user numbers and larger buildings. Logical layouts which are easy for people to explore and good signage, when needed, also facilitate independent use.

The continuing importance of interaction between staff and users is acknowledged. A welcoming face close to the entrance is a feature of successful new public libraries in New South Wales. Again it all comes back to people, which was why the phrase 'people places' appealed to us to describe the buildings we wanted to promote.

## **Conclusion**

*People places* was the result of our desire to endorse a consultative planning process, to describe a planning framework, to set out good design principles and to provide benchmarks (which are really space standards) based on forecast populations and the services provided.

That is not, of course, the end of the story. Next year we begin a review process, establishing how useful our guide has been and how successful the resulting buildings have been. We shall also be able to review our situation in the light of international best practice. This visit to Singapore and the papers at this conference will make a valuable contribution to our review.

## **About the authors**

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