

Reflections on the Great Public Library Tour

This presentation is a visual essay and personal reflection on the experience of the Viclink Great Library Tour last year. There have been a number of presentations around the country about the tour, and it's been cut lots of ways. Some of you here this afternoon were the visited and others the visitors. Others of you will be familiar with the libraries we went to. I thought I would frame my talk today by using the themes of this conference – Community, Collections, Creativity and Capability.

The trip is still with me and I love listening to others talking about it. Like our Metlib conferences, it was a great advantage to be part of a group and to have the time to discuss and explore shared experiences with others. Although I have been to many of these libraries previously, I found the group experience much richer. The tour was undertaken by 15 people, all connected to public libraries, 3 from Queensland, 2 from South Australian and 10 from Victoria. We spent 20 days visiting 23 libraries in Singapore, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and Hong Kong last September / October. It was a full and generous program due to the wonderful warmth and hospitality of our hosts, who could not have been kinder. We enjoyed cultural as well as learning experiences, and I will always have memories of sitting on the terrace of the small city house in Stockholm in the evening overlooking the ships and ferries; the bonding of the Finnish sauna; and the fellowship of our last dinner in Hong Kong, as much as the beautiful libraries we saw and the services we heard about.

Community

The first of our conference themes is community. The libraries we visited were products of their communities, of the priority placed on education and learning and also the philosophies of their Directors.

Library as place

We are familiar with the library as place, a civic place that defines an area, city or town, usually with impressive architecture. We saw many of these libraries on our trip, examples of civic pride and celebrations of culture and learning.

The Malmö library in Sweden is surely one of the most beautiful libraries in the world, with its soaring calendar of light, bespoke furniture and its emphasis on light and space. The view out onto the park, forever changing according to the seasons, is particularly lovely in Autumn when we were there; the presence of the building which despite its size does not seem overwhelming; and the feeling inside of an ordinary library – familiar to us all.

The National Library of Singapore is another big statement - huge windows looking out, the collection in the middle, seating on the perimeter for users to observe the outside as they go about their intellectual pursuits. Lovely courtyards provide tropical greenness and a sense of coolness and the glass lifts provide more connection to the exterior world.

The Asplund Library in Stockholm is considered one of the most important buildings of the 21st century; it leads the reader in through a narrow entrance to the riches within

which is quite the opposite of the National Library of Singapore and Malmö. Inside the spaces are decorated and created for the imagination and the senses. There is a feeling of being enveloped by learning and matters of the mind and spirit. I haven't been in Stockholm in winter, but I can imagine that this warm indoor space would be a real refuge from the outside world and would create a sense of peace and comfort. Certainly when we were there on a cold wet autumn Stockholm evening, it was a wonderful place to be in.

The Hong Kong public library is another grand civic statement that reflects the importance of learning and information in Chinese culture. It is on prime real estate and gives a sense of permanence and solidity – that building is there for the long term, and expresses the City's commitment to libraries and what they stand for.

Library as community hub

We are also familiar with the concept of library as community hub, as the lounge room of the community, of the library as third place and many of the libraries that we visited demonstrated these ideas. Bishan library (NLB) is a great example of a library as a third place with its café, neat little pods where teenagers compete to inhabit, space for activities, and places where students can hang out and study. The pods are highly desirable and obviously have elements of coolness. The library was packed when we were there, a lively, bustling, purposeful place.

Sello library just outside Helsinki was another example of a community hub. A large library by Australian standards at 5,500 sq m, it is part of the Sello shopping centre, the second largest shopping centre in Finland. The shopping centre developers are keen to have libraries as “anchor stores”; they believe they are a civilizing influence. The staff go out into the shopping centre for programs as well, with children's storytimes and other activities. There are many partnerships with local organisations and groups, and one of their successful programs is a multicultural mother and child group that is especially aimed at newly arrived daughters in law. The library provides a place for these women to build friendships and learn about the Finnish way of life. Games nights are held for teenagers where they host World of Warcraft sessions on Saturday nights when the library is closed. The impression of Sello library was that it was a real hub of the community. This was enhanced when we were there by the fabulous children's exhibition that was mounted in the front of the library. We saw the little ones lining up outside waiting for the doors to open and the sense of joy and excitement that the installation created was palpable. Some children were coming every day to experience this travelling exhibition, which was there for 2 months. The Director of the Espoo Library Service told us she wanted the libraries to be Qualified Cultural Department Stores, like their Stockman stores. (David Jones equivalent)

Hong Kong Central library provided another example of reflecting what is important to their community with their Toy Library, a large play area in the middle of this fairly formal building where children can be socialised. In a society where one baby is the norm, the library has developed a place where parents can bring their children to interact with others in a safe and secure environment.

The adventure library

Hans van Velsen talked about transforming Amsterdam from a lending library to adventure library. The OBA is very activated – there is a lot going on, and it is in every sense a modern library. It has become the most popular place to go in Amsterdam for a number of reasons; there is the combination of information, education and culture, the possibility for everything. It has become a meeting place, where the students from the conservatorium next door feel free to play their instruments when they come in. It has a marvellous view from the terrace of the restaurant on the 10th floor, with a really modern, large restaurant; and so attracts tourists as well as traditional library users. Being in the library is a good experience, there are very few signs, the design indicates the use of particular spaces and there are no signs in the quiet reading area, but it is quiet. The escalator that takes you up through the building exposes each floor and it is obvious where the children's library is, where the av collection is and indeed where the books are. It is a big library – at 28,000 sq m the largest public library in Europe, but it does not feel imposing or overwhelming. The layout was designed on the principle of 1/3 space for the collection and 2/3 space for people – for exhibitions, café, programs. “There is always something to experience in the OBA” is their slogan.

The Director of DOK, the public library in Delft, is a former executive for a television station in the Netherlands. He believes public institutions are very important and libraries are a treasure. He exhorts us to tell our footprint – worldwide we are the biggest institution. Life, Eppo von Nispen believes, is about having fun, but, he says, most libraries are not about having fun. Visits to public libraries in the Netherlands are dropping by 6% pa, a matter he says that should concern librarians much more than it seems to be doing. He sees libraries as concept centres, like Ikea, where you can walk in and test things. He believes we should be working with public companies, broadcasters and such and that libraries have a global reach and a local touch. The physical DOK library is very groovy; it would have to be the coolest public library in the world. It is edgy, contemporary, rich in media and content. There is a sense of purpose and creation when you walk around the library and, like OBA, a sense of discovery. It is not gimmicky, but based on ideas of learning, culture, exploration and discovery. There are zones for different activities and for different demographics. There is a sense of the library being ahead of things in technology and retail. It is better than retail – it promotes an inclusive, buzzy vibe, within the traditional role of the library being available and welcoming to all. Like many of the libraries we visited, it reflects the community and the type of library it needs. How many of us could attract 250 people to a series of philosophy lectures?

The Working room

Where the tour differed from our experiences was in the ways that various library directors were thinking about libraries and how they were presenting their buildings to their communities. Maija Berendston talked about moving from the concept of library as living room to library as working room. Library 10 embodied this, with the provision of spaces and equipment to create, display and publish. Flexible furniture allows users to create their own workspace and people are encouraged to move chairs and tables around to suit their purpose. There is equipment for borrowing – laptops, usb sticks, etc. Library 10 is not a big space, but it has created different experiences in

a very clever way, the classical music section is furnished differently from the rock and pop area and the world music area. The facilities at Library 10 support the notion of the working room; there are editing and audio studios; and a group work room, a small conference room with video conferencing facilities. Helsinki requires a library card for all these activities; this is a deliberate effort to expand the library brand, like a club membership where you can do many things.

The unlibrary

Inga Lunden talked about an unlibrary, creating collaborative learning zones, where people can create content, libraries with experience, reading and learning zones for unexpected meetings whether with an object, content or person. Their new library in Kista will embody this idea. It will be built next to the railway station and provide a true “third place between job and home.” There are other libraries located by junctions and communications nodes, a subway library is due to open next month, and has been listed by Conde Naste as one of the top 10 cultural places in the world (and its not even opened yet!) Kista is the Silicon Valley of Sweden and has a diverse community, with a mixture of IT professionals and immigrants. The aim is to use social networking as a bridge between language and cultures and between the physical and the virtual library.

Collections

The next theme of our conference is Collections and the notion of lots of books comprising a public library collection seems to be a limited interpretation of what the future holds according to many of the Directors we visited. One of the main take home messages was that *libraries are about people not about books*.

Content

Inga Lunden talked about content being king – it’s about the word, about stories, and they can be found in books, in digital format and from other people. It’s about library users not just being consumers, but also being contributors. This was particularly evident in Library10, where people are encouraged to create their own content; producing their own music cds and dvds. Maija Berndston says that many of today’s customers come to the library to publish and they provide the means for people to do that, with high end pcs and software for electronic publishing as well as the studios and other equipment.

Libraries are about content, and this content is still predominately available through print, and books will be around for quite some time yet. Almost all the libraries we visited had minimised their book stock in favour of providing space for programs and activities and for technology. The OBA only has a small percentage of their collection on open access. It is a library of last resort for Dutch books, but there has been more and more moved to closed stacks over the past few years.

As well as this extension of traditional library collections, we saw a lot of content. DOK is full of content – books, magazines, cds, dvds; as are most of the other libraries we visited. Pushing boundaries about content in libraries does not mean that

libraries are neglecting this part of their service, and some of them are going to great lengths to promote reading, and find new ways for people to learn and discover. Stockholm has created a new website that encourages people to interact and participate, through writing reviews, recommending titles and building communities of readers. This trend is spreading fast.

Context

Libraries we visited understood that collections and information are enhanced if they are placed in context, this can be done physically or virtually.

Eppo van Nispen stressed that information has value, and context is important. Browsing shelves can lead to all sorts of exciting discoveries, to new experiences and new knowledge. He says that there is nothing more beautiful than a beautiful story; and it's about the story not the media. Movies are as important as books for children born after 1985, and they are as likely to get their information and recreation via video as print. Books aren't dead he says, they are going digital, and books aren't the future, people are. The value add of libraries are:

- People - enthusiastic, passionate, and engaged staff, and the users;
- Means - the place, virtual or physical;
- Metadata - helping people find and try something new;
- Media – interactive, user generated media as well as commercially produced material.

Presentation of media at DOK has been taken to the next level too – the shelving is not expensive but it has been carefully thought out and is imaginative and shows off to best advantage the books and other media. Again there is a sense of discovery, of exploration. DOK's collection includes 4,000 original art works that are loaned for 6 months, and can be purchased.

The OBA has integrated a museum function in with their media by using integrated bookends. There is a dedicated staff member who curates these mini exhibitions, liaising with museums to provide the materials that are constantly changing and providing visual stimulation as you walk through the library.

The Library@esplanade houses its performing arts collection in four boutique sections comprising film, music, dance and theatre, reflecting the content in the physical layout. The dance collection is in a section that boasts a properly sprung dance floor, where performances take place. Small screens show film and music and dance performances and there is a practice room with 2 pianos as well as a performance area for concerts. The collection is enhanced by the surroundings and the beautiful displays and the collection also has more serious intent as it provides access to films that have been restricted for viewing only by researchers and academics.

Another library where the surroundings and presentation enhance the content is the Children's Room in Stockholm at the Culture House. Here there are carefully considered built structures to encourage a sense of adventure and discovery. How could children not be entranced and engaged by the space, the nooks and crannies, the energy here? This space is so popular its usage has to be rationed, and only a certain

number of children are allowed in at any one time to preserve the quality of their experience. It is a wonderful place of the imagination.

Living libraries

Sello offers the opportunity to borrow a librarian; bookings can be made for 45 minute blocks to help with research. Norrebro library in Copenhagen has a different version of the living library concept; theirs has a career focus, where people can borrow various professionals and tradespeople to learn more about working in different fields.

Materials handling

We saw a lot of technology managing materials handling, nearly all the libraries we visited were RFID and had sorting machines and self checkouts.

Creativity and new media

We saw some very impressive examples of how libraries are carving a niche for themselves in this space. TV stations, radio stations, music studios, editing studios, exhibitions, theatres, screens, and pcs, online – it was wonderful.

Theatres in libraries

The most memorable theatre is the fully equipped Theatre van't woord in the OBA, with 270 seats, the 10th largest in Amsterdam. After only just two years of operation it is holding 25 performances per month. It is very impressive with professionally designed light, sound and recording equipment, and nearly everything is possible – film, music, and lectures; it is also linked to the catering and conference rooms. OBA also has a smaller children's theatre with 40 seats.

Broadcasting and studios

We saw two radio stations in libraries, at the OBA and Library10, both professional studios, and DOK has a mobile radio station that it takes out to schools. OBA Live broadcasts daily locally and nationally and people are invited to come in and discuss issues with guests, including politicians. Library10 was broadcasting when we were there – the radio station broadcasts some of the concerts and writer visits and other activities.

Music studios were another feature of a number of libraries we visited – Sello has equipment including 2 keyboards and Logic professional mixing software. It is booked constantly and workshops are booked out 6 months in advance. Musical evenings are held regularly and studio workshops are conducted to show people how to use the software and hardware that is available for mixing and editing. Hip hop and rap artists are invited and there is a music teacher on staff. Library10 also has audio and video editing studios and this was a popular venue while the Eurovision song contest was on with many people coming in to record their own karaoke cds.

DOK were showing people's stories in the library. They invited people to tell their personal stories, similar to *This is Your Life*, and then went and filmed friends and relations, who were invited into the library to view the finished program. There are screens everywhere in DOK showing all sorts of things. They ran a summer camp for 150 children aged 6 – 12 on how to make TV shows, they took their own mobile TV studio; and 10 staff and volunteers managed the children. They also take their mobile radio station out to schools and work with students there.

Social networking

Stockholm is using Second Life to host virtual language cafes that mirror the real life ones they have in their libraries. Language cafes offer participants the opportunity to practice languages and to learn more about different cultures. Sello uses YouTube to promote their programs. Stockholm has also built a new website that encourages interaction and participation by encouraging people to rate and review their reading and suggest good reads to other people.

DOK have built their own library management system as they felt so constrained by the commercially available ones in the Netherlands. They have integrated reviews, embedded YouTube videos and covers of just returned books. They say that having their own system gives them the freedom and possibility to adapt and change.

Capability and careers

The final dimension is capability and careers – and we saw some interesting practices as we visited the different libraries.

Leadership

Debra Rosenfeldt has highlighted the leadership traits that the Directors of these libraries show – it is a much more political and high profile role than Australian library managers. Hans van Velsen in particular fought for his library and developed it over 10 years, providing the continuity and the drive to get it built. He introduces every outside program held at the library in the theatre and conference rooms to promote the library and to emphasise the role of the library in the city.

Debra lists the following attributes that these Directors share:

- Infectious enthusiasm, even after many years in the role
- Absolute conviction about the value of libraries
- Great clarity of vision and a way with words, the ability to create compelling sound bites that linger in the minds of library decision makers
- Ingenuity and political savvy
- A bias for action
- Love of innovation
- Preparedness to take risk to have a go, to live with the occasional failure
- Incredible stamina

We were inspired by them; by their vision and their belief in public libraries.

Professional development

The National Library Board of Singapore outsources many of the lower end tasks, such as shelving, shelf reading and the Post Office provides the sorting and delivery of inter branch materials. As mentioned earlier, self service is very common in nearly all of the libraries we visited, and this has impacted on how staff are used too. NLB uses a rigorous process of staff performance, with staff being “force ranked” across the organisation. All staff undergo 60 – 100 hours of professional development per year, and some staff are recruited with qualifications but generally staff are employed for attitude rather than qualifications.

The Meetingpoint staff at Helsinki library are expected to keep up to date with technology and there is a small pool of money to buy new things to learn about. They also train the other staff in the system on the use of technology. Staff at Library 10 undertake many different roles – Web 2.0 trainer, media assistant, studio engineer, promoter, sound editor, camera man, lighting technician, radio journalist and roadie. There is an expectation of flexibility, willingness to learn and to have a go.

Recruitment

Helsinki was probably the most visibly different from libraries in Australia as far as staffing goes, the staff at Library10 are all young, and there is a real mix of experience and qualifications. Meetingpoint staff must be able to use technology, train themselves and have an IT degree. The staff are chosen to match the user demographic. They go much further than staff here would, making recommendations to customers about types of technology to purchase; they even have a Laptop Doctor who fixes up problems.

The International Library in Stockholm has 130 languages in the collection, but they told us the most important aspect of their library is the staff, who between them speak 27 languages. Staff here are passionate about what they do, and often combine book buying with their annual holidays.

A common theme at many of the libraries we visited was the lack of qualified librarians. This is the case in the Netherlands, where there is a trend to work and study at the same time. OBA is open long hours – from 10am to 10 pm 360 days a year. There are 120 front of house staff, 60 librarians and 60 customer service officers who work an average of 28 hours a week (the work week in the Netherlands is 36 hours) and the preference now is to recruit from the hospitality sector rather than customer service as the emphasis in the library shifts. Librarians work on the floor, the information desks are designed to consult with the borrower side by side. Increasingly programs are being held on the weekends requiring more staff to work then. Eppo van Nisssen suggested (not so tongue in cheek I think) that given the biggest users of libraries are women aged 30 – 45, libraries should be hiring good looking young men.

Conclusion

The Great Library Tour was such a success because of the generosity and willingness of library directors to share their libraries and their cities and the enthusiasm and commitment of the travellers. We had the opportunity to meet some of the foremost

thinkers in public libraries today and we are the richer for the experience. Stay tuned for the next tour, coming soon!!