

The future of the library

David Jones*

At its most elemental, a library facility provides appropriate spaces for the people who use it, the staff who serve them, and the resources they use. You could elaborate on this or simplify it, but users, resources and staff are inextricably entwined as the three basic building blocks. No-one reading this will need reminding that the demands made upon all three are changing rapidly in the information environment, and that the implications for our current and future buildings are considerable.

Will we need library buildings?

There is understandable and infectious enthusiasm for the capabilities of information technology. Networks can transmit data and information to individuals in their homes, to students in classrooms, and to people in offices, in the workplace, or simply travelling from one location to another. We can digitise practically anything — assuming that economic, practical and legal issues are satisfactorily resolved. Storage media are becoming progressively more space-efficient. The availability of services grows with every new cable rollout. The logical conclusion for some is that 'when all the essential resources normally provided by a traditional library can be digitised and put onto the Internet, the need for a library building disappears altogether.' (Cheah & Koh, 'Internet libraries in science education' in *Libraries in national development: papers presented at the 10th congress of southeast Asian librarians*, 1996: 303). It is safe to say that it will be a considerable time before all the underlying assumptions can be made, but anticipation of even partial realisation of this forecast is affecting the ways in which we plan and use space.

Even when a substantial part of this dream does become a reality, there will be many ways in which the library will have the opportunity to flourish. Some authors have identified a wider role in the strengthening of

the sense of 'community' through a physical library facility, something which I have observed at a local level in the enthusiastic community involvement in the planning of new public libraries at Liverpool and Maitland in New South Wales. Others see technology as a way for libraries to fulfil their traditional roles even better. Others see the opportunity for librarians to stake their claim to the future.

Implications for physical facilities

Against this volatile background planning physical facilities becomes challenging, to say the least. Using new technology in conjunction with traditional resources, for example, has led in the short-term to increased demand for reader space. On the other hand CD-ROM resources or online access have enabled some institutions to retire or withdraw significant quantities of hard copy. Access to the Internet by some formerly heavy library users has sometimes reduced their use of the library. Awareness of library services and resources via the Internet, however, may be generating new business. Scenario planning is filled with swings and roundabouts such as these.

Flexibility and adaptability of spaces is a crucial way of coping with the uncertainty of future requirements. This applies to structures as a whole, as well as to smaller elements. It means broad areas which can be adapted with relative ease for shelving, reader seating, meeting space, staff areas, training rooms. It means a minimum of built-in furniture, and a maximum of modular free-standing items. Furniture with lay-in (or 'soft') wiring, for example, can be changed much more easily and cheaply than hard-wired furniture. It means heating, ventilation, lighting, power, data and communications installations which can be reconfigured easily and which have the capacity for a variety of uses.

The convergence of digital equipment — such as combined faxes, printers and copiers

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— can reduce space requirements. Uniform cabling for voice and data creates flexibility. Reduced size and power consumption of electronic equipment has energy and spatial implications. Less stringent environmental requirements for computer equipment may obviate the need for special conditions in different sections of a building. So as well as posing challenges, many hardware developments are aiding us in the process of creating adaptable spaces.

The human element

But however flexible and adaptable we make our buildings and their fittings, we must not forget the human element. The library is a place for people, a place where essentially social beings communicate, gather data, search for information and knowledge, and one day, achieve wisdom. Human considerations go far beyond the demands made by standards, building codes, accessibility rules and occupational health and safety legislation. Flair and aesthetic appeal in creating environments in which people can use library resources conveniently and in comfort should not be neglected.

Many librarians involved in planning new facilities or in upgrading existing buildings are naturally keen to emphasise the adoption of the latest technology, and to

stress functionality. But they also wish to create warm, welcoming, exciting and memorable environments. These two desires are by no means mutually exclusive, provided there is enough vision and persistence on the part of the client, and sufficient ability, resourcefulness and willingness to listen on the part of the design professionals. The client/designer relationship has never been more important in meeting the challenges facing our current stock of library buildings and those which we are still planning.

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