

Meeting point and community focus



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A few months ago I was talking to a Malaysian developer who specialises in very large scale housing estates. He wants to add a new dimension to his housing developments by enhancing the infrastructure so that residents have not just kerbing, guttering and street lighting, but a degree of self-sufficiency, a village atmosphere, with corner stores, recreation facilities, meeting spaces, youth centres, child care and libraries. He is keen to build not just housing, but communities, and libraries are part of his vision.

Not long after that I met the head of a school of architecture in Jakarta. He outlined to me his model of a small public library at the hub of its village or town, integrated with meeting and cultural facilities, forming what he described as a community centre greater than the sum of its parts. Back home I visited a new facility with which the professor would have felt immediately familiar. In an outer suburb, all under one roof, were a library, community organisation offices, youth centre with clinic, model kitchen, counselling rooms, activities room, community meeting and display spaces. Had there been room on the site there would have been a child care centre too.

In our region, as elsewhere in the world, community needs and perceptions (as much as the economic imperative of making the best use of resources by, for example, sharing infrastructure) are driving forces behind changing concepts in public, and to a certain extent academic library buildings. Library planners are thinking very carefully about what people need, about the way people make use of facilities, about symbiotic relationships of community facilities, and about how people feel. Ultimately the buildings must make a connection with the community, and the community must like its public buildings. And planners are endeavouring in much more than a haphazard way to ask the community what it wants.

In one recent Australian study of public library users and non-users those questioned saw the public library as 'increasingly important as a community meeting place'. They saw it as important for social interaction, a safe haven, and a place where people could keep in touch with their cultural heritage. They suggested broadening activities and facilities, including a coffee shop, literary luncheons, a community centre, and coaching for students. (Briggs, S, Guldberg, H and Sivaciyan, S, 1996. *Lane Cove Library: a part of life*. Sydney: Library Council of New South Wales in association with Lane Cove Council: 47-48) The coffee shop is a recurring theme: at a New South Wales conference in 1992 Peter Corris told the audience every public library should have one. A 1996 American Library Association conference had a session entitled 'Espresso and ambience'. (Pierce, W, 1997. 'Espresso and ambience: library cafés'. *Aplis* 10 (2,

June): 100-102.) Cafés figured in the recent report, *Flexible models of public library service for the new century*, which Hudson Howells (Hudson Howells Asia Pacific Consulting, 1996. *Flexible models of public library service for the new century*. National Summary Report is at <http://dino.slsa.sa.gov.au/report/nsrept.htm>) prepared in South Australia, identifying a basket of products and services which are, or could be delivered by public libraries.

The desire to broaden activities and appeal seems to be widespread. In the current wave of public library construction in the United States many 'quasi-community centres' are emerging, with meeting rooms, galleries, services for people with disabilities, literacy programs, auditoriums, museums, vendor-operated computer and photocopy centres, video rental shops, and more. [Kent, C and Coult, G, 1997. 'Information power houses'. *World architecture* 56 (May): 108] In all kinds of situations the library has the potential to extend its appeal and provide a focus for its community. As Edward Lim has commented — in a paper on a virtual university library — 'libraries are more than information centres. They have an archival and preservation role; they are also cultural icons, and have a social role to play.' [Lim, E, 1996. 'The virtual library meets the virtual campus: strategies for the 21st Century'. In *Electronic dream? Virtual nightmare: the reality for libraries: 1996 VALA biennial conference and exhibition conference proceedings*. Melbourne: Victorian Association for Library Automation, 21-37.] We live in a society which depends upon interpersonal communication, and this is increasingly important in an electronic environment which has the capacity to isolate as well as to link. The library has been likened to a modern agora, 'a public place where people can rebuild aspects of their community, perhaps even becoming the heart of their society.' [Dowler, L, 1996. 'Our edifice at the precipice'. *Library journal* 121 (3): 118-120]

Libraries of all kinds can (and many already do) have a distinct social focus. It is encouraging how frequently concepts of connection with the community are finding expression in design briefs for libraries. It is even more encouraging to see the results in the form and fabric of completed buildings, through the thoughtful grouping of community facilities, or community art woven into the fabric of the building, or services tailored to meet the needs of a specific community.

Most encouraging of all is the growing extent of community involvement, lateral thinking, questioning of users and non-users, and lively debate. This reinforces the perception (in many places already the reality) of the library building as a meeting point and a community focus, as well as an information technology place, where a wide range of resources can be made relevant to the entire community. ■