

# In search of style and substance



**John Shipp**

ALIA president

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**A**LIA president wanders the streets looking for somewhere to breakfast. I wanted good food accompanied by discreet service in an elegant but relaxed setting. Not knowing the area, I selected by external appearance. It took some time, but my criteria were met in Little Collins Street. I entered hoping that the quality of the food and service would match the decor.

As with restaurants, the physical appearance of libraries can be an indicator of the quality of services provided. Unlike restaurateurs, however, library staff do not always have control over the type of buildings from which they operate. The maintenance of our buildings is often dependent on policy or funding beyond our control. Still, there is a great deal that can be achieved with even the most unattractive premises.

We can all think of libraries which do not quite work for some reason. The problem is usually related to an overemphasis on form and appearance and not enough on function and user requirements. Typical are the grand foyers of some of our major libraries. Devoid of signs or other indicators, they leave visitors with few options — either leave or try to find services by discovery, intuition or luck.

The tradition of designing libraries to imitate Greek or Roman temples has given us some wonderful buildings. They provide settings in which knowledge can be revered if not worshipped. Entering their portals automatically reduces voices to a whisper and intimidates all but the initiated or the most determined. In other libraries you are assailed by a myriad of signs which instruct, direct and warn. Sometimes, these signs are well-presented but more often are temporary, hand-written missives which linger until they attain a heritage significance of their own. Over the years, I have visited many libraries which resemble second-hand shops with their jumble of mismatched furniture and an all-pervading expectation that there must be a treasure hidden among the junk.

While some people will use a library irrespective of its appearance, the majority will either not enter or will not return if the physical ambience is unsatisfactory. Yet, the initial impression gained on entering many libraries is unwelcoming. This is difficult to overcome even if the staff and services are faultless.

If we want libraries and library staff to be well-regarded, we need to pay attention to our public persona. A major part of that image is the

design and presentation of our physical surroundings.

Many a good library building has been marred by flights of fancy on the part of architects, politicians and librarians. For many architects, form precedes function as they seek to design a building which is an immediate testimony to their creativity. Long after they have moved on to another project, library staff and users are coping diligently with their follies.

The blame is not all with the designers. In many instances librarians are equally as culpable. Many of us are convinced we know how our libraries are used and how they will be utilised in the future. Often, our beliefs are based on supposition and lofty ideals rather than on empirical knowledge.

Some years ago, I stood in the foyer of the University of Wollongong Library noting where people went after entering. The majority never left the ground floor and used a small range of services — reserve collection, catalogue terminals, photocopiers, toilets, reference desk and loans counter. Using that information, we redesigned the foyer. Over the ensuing years, the student population grew and there were changes in the way the library was used. The foyer was redesigned several times to cope with these changes. By using modular furniture and by utilising the ceiling cavity for cabling, we were able to make these changes with relative ease and economy.

The point of the parable is to design flexibly for the present in the certain knowledge that whatever you plan will be changed in the future.

Don't be afraid to challenge architectural advice. Most architects only ever design one library and they are learning on the job. If you are fortunate enough to get an architect who works with you as a partner, rejoice — for you have found a rare treasure.

Thankfully, an increasing number of libraries are user-oriented, well-designed and provide an environment which encourages their use. The creation of these conditions is often achieved despite the basic design of the building and through the persistence and creativity of library staff.

How was breakfast? Well, I'll give it ten points for decor, nine for service, nine for food quality and presentation but zero for the loudest cappuccino machine in the southern hemisphere! ■

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