

# Linking the past to the future: a new age of library design

Carol Ely, building project co-ordinator, State Library of Victoria

**B**egun in 1990, the State Library of Victoria's redevelopment is now in its eighth year of construction. The redevelopment is a key component of the Victorian state government's extensive *Agenda 21* program, aimed at revitalising the centre of Melbourne.

Since its establishment in 1856, the library has shared its central city site with other cultural institutions. At the completion of the redevelopment, which is expected to occur in 2002, the library will be the sole occupant of the site that covers an entire city block. Restoration of existing buildings and limited new construction provides for significantly increased space which will enable the library to improve existing services and develop new ones.

The project will greatly expand public areas, while technological advances will improve and extend information services. Further, the redevelopment will provide environmentally-controlled housing for the library's priceless and irreplaceable collections and facilitate improved working conditions for staff.

An overall design strategy for the project has been generated by the interior design firm, Geyer Design, in conjunction with the project's architects, Ancher Mortlock and Woolley. One of the challenges of redeveloping the existing site is that the design must link a number of existing and new buildings of various ages and design into a cohesive whole.

In September 1993, the State Library of Victoria welcomed the public into the new North East Wing, the new temporary home of the library's special collections. A purpose-built, six-storey, air-conditioned storage facility, the North East Wing currently houses some of the most fragile and valuable materials owned by the library. The collections relocated to this building included rare books, the pictures collection, manuscripts, maps and newspapers. Almost seven kilometres of mobile shelving and a kilometre of static shelving were installed prior to the relocation of the collections.

In October 1995 the library re-occupied the refurbished La Trobe Building, subsequently renamed the Auguste La Touche Armstrong building. A significant addition to the State Library complex, achieved with this refurbishment, is a new theatre, which provides seating for 210 people in



air-conditioned comfort. It has been fitted out with first-class audio-visual facilities and the auditorium has an audio loop for people with hearing impairment. Also completed this year was the construction of the first of four proposed courtyards surrounding the Dome Building. A glazed atrium roof installed over a space-frame provides an elegant, airy precinct. In the future, this space will be the permanent home of the library's genealogy service.

In March 1997, the library proclaimed its role as a leader in technological advancement with the opening of the Trescowthick Information Centre. Occupying the entire ground floor of the Dome Building, the centre is the first public area specifically refurbished to cater for the computer age. The centre has forty personal computers providing online public access to the State Library's vast collection of book and non-book materials, including a visual database of more than 104 000 images. Users are also able to search CD-ROM indexes and full-text databases, the catalogues of other libraries and the Internet.

In 1998, the library will relocate its heavily-used newspaper service to the second of the four courtyards to be constructed. Documentation development for the next two stages is well underway, as is a review of the original 1989 master plan. Included in the next stage will be the construction of the two remaining courtyards. These courtyards will house the art, music and performing arts service and an existing new multimedia service. Also planned is the restoration of the famous Domed Reading Room and the surrounding annulus. Under intense investigation is the feasibility of reinstating the skylights. It is believed that the domed sky-

lights and lantern rooflight are of significance to the form and ambience of the Domed Reading Room and should therefore ideally be reinstated. This is however, conditional on other roofing works still being investigated. Future planning also involves restoration of McCoy Hall to provide an additional beautiful reading room and creation of new and exciting exhibition spaces.

Frances Awcock, chief executive officer and state librarian,

says the redevelopment process has presented a unique challenge. Not only is a whole city block to be dedicated to library purposes, but the redeveloped buildings will provide exciting links between the past, the present and the future.

As well as celebrating our heritage through restoration of many of the nineteenth-century interiors and the great Domed Reading Room, we will also be creating facilities and services that are highly visible expressions of the 'new age'. ■

## Youthful creations: designs for all ages

Ruth Cameron, manager community information and libraries, Brisbane City Council Library Service

What do the words 'library design' mean to a librarian? The challenges of combining form with function, users' needs with practical restraints, and workflow requirements with aesthetic considerations are formidable.

The design work of librarians generally includes such activities as working with the project's architects and library staff to detail the brief, negotiating with developers, planning the project and ensuring that the design is operationally sound. Depending on the scope and size of the project, the librarian might also be involved with furniture selection, light and safety fittings, or even colour co-ordination. Juggling these considerations is impossible without input from the final end-users of the service — tapping into the needs and wants of customers is vital.

The Brisbane City Council harnessed the creative talents of one of its most vital — and most demanding — customer groups when it invited the young people of Brisbane to become involved in planning a 'youthspace' at the Mount Ommaney Library.

The youthspace was designed to appeal to customers aged twelve to seventeen. Approximately sixty square metres in area, rectangular-shaped and defined by a curved feature wall, a large display wall, windows and shelving, the space is relaxed, colourful and very distinctive.

It features a 'comfy corner' with bean bags, lounge chairs and popular books, magazines and music. It also provides Internet access, networked CD-ROM and Databank facilities, a whiteboard, pigeonholes and a large display wall. Local young people have decorated the space with a retro-look table and artwork such as silk hangings, posters and small sculptures.



Leader of the Mount Ommaney Library youth group speaks at the opening of the library's youthspace

The youthspace functions as an informal study area and as a place where young people can select items for loan, read, meet friends, chat, play board-games and create artwork for the mini-gallery's display wall.

Young people are encouraged to use the whole library and, although the youthspace was designed to meet their needs and style, they do not have exclusive use of the area. The youthspace is not physically separate from the library, but is an incorporated part of the whole. This allows the youthspace and its facilities to be fully accessible during open hours while also providing an appropriate mix of visibility, privacy and independence for young people.

The key to its success is that it derived from a genuine expressed community youth need and developed through local youth participation and input facilitated by a special consultant.

The Mount Ommaney Library youthspace highlights a number of the most important design values and criteria to consider when designing public libraries.

These include:

- open communication with all stakeholders;
- a co-operative and flexible team;
- spacious, open-plan layout with spaces for community interaction;
- a mix of formal study areas with informal lounges and chatting space;
- wide spacing between rows to facilitate wheelchair and trolley access;
- low maximum shelf heights for better reach, visibility and ambience;
- quality materials, fittings and finishes to reduce maintenance and give confidence in service;
- ample plain-language signage; and
- congenial staff facilities for staff health, safety, security and morale.

Whatever the size or scope of a public library design project, its success can only be judged by its customers. The youthspace at Mount Ommaney has succeeded: it is in full use and the Brisbane City Council has funded two more youthspaces for 1998. ■