

Maintaining order amidst chaos: the anatomy of a renovation

Catherine Panich, branch librarian, Woden Town Centre Library

The Woden Town Centre Library in Canberra is the largest branch of the ACT Library Service. It serves more than 80 000 people, is open 61.5 hours per week, lends approximately 475 000 items per year and employs 12.4 full-time equivalent staff. Renovating such a large and widely-used resource centre presented special challenges — particularly as we were determined to keep our doors open throughout the entire renovation.

When we began the renovation process at the beginning of 1997, it rapidly became clear that major changes were in order. Not only did we need to upgrade and modernise our internal design, but the ACT Government wanted to open a Government Shop Front in the corner of our building which held part of our reference collection and the library's cafe.

In 1994, when the library's ceiling was replaced and the lighting and air-conditioning upgraded, the library was shut for six weeks. In contrast, our most recent effort replaced the carpet, exchanged the wooden shelving for metal and replaced the old circulation desk with an architect- and staff-designed centre. We enlarged the staff room, replaced the kitchen, installed a new coffee shop, upgraded the community room and made way for the Government Shop Front. We replaced the internal airlock with an external one. And, we did all this without closing the library!

Of course, there were moments when we questioned whether we were providing good customer service — occasionally the construction noise was so bad that we couldn't even talk on the telephone. Fortunately, we were for the most part able to negotiate with the builders to ensure that very noisy activity was scheduled in the early morning before the library opened. Workmen arrived at 7.00am and left at 4.00pm Monday to Saturday, which meant that Sunday afternoons were our only absolutely quiet times.

The renovations happened in stages. During the first stage the carpet and shelving were replaced and the existing coffee shop was closed. Before beginning the next stage we had to relocate the information and circulation desks and build temporary walls to isolate the construction zones from the rest of the library.

We also had to move out of our staffroom and into the workroom. We had to ensure that the public toilets remained accessible, as they are used by staff and the public.

The circulation desk was relocated within the children's area with access through the fire door. A ramp had to be built to upgrade access to that door and signs were placed around the building telling our customers where to find us.

We replaced the carpet and shelving section by section. Only occasionally were parts of the collection closed to users. We were fortunate in that the carpet-layer and shelf installers were most co-operative, coming in whenever we managed to move the books. We employed a contractor to shift the bulk of the collection as we deemed it an unacceptable health and



The new entrance to the recently-renovated Woden Town Centre Library

safety risk to ask staff to move such a huge volume of material. Particular challenges were to be found in co-ordinating the removal of wooden shelves with the arrival of metal ones, and organising temporary storage.

For six months before the renovations started we met with the architect regularly to design our new and improved circulation area. Our first step was to teach him how a library operated and what specific features we absolutely had to have. We analysed our workflow patterns and discussed them with the architect. He then went away and began to draw. Every week we changed his drawings until we got what we wanted and he felt that the plan was both functional and aesthetically pleasing. This very important process — in which all staff and management participated — means that everyone 'owns' the desk and that we managed to get it mostly right. Since we have begun using it only minor modifications have been made — an accomplishment of which we are quite proud.

Information technology and telephone technicians had to come in both before the old desk was dismantled and after the new desk was installed. Moving the computers to the new circulation area happened in the morning before the new circulation area opened. But we didn't miss a beat — there were only two hours during which we required both the temporary door to the interim circulation area and the doors to the new desk to be open. When the ACT minister for urban services, Trevor Kaine, opened the door to the new circulation area on 11 November 1997 — just in time for the library's twentieth birthday — we felt like we had truly moved into our new home.

We have continued to fine-tune our workflows and teamwork since the opening of the circulation desk. Reference librarians and circulation desk staff work from the same area and this has led to greater efficiency and better team spirit. During the entire process we kept our spirits up by rewarding ourselves with champagne and cake when major milestones were achieved. This in turn helped us to focus on providing the very best customer service we could — we received very few complaints through the entire process, and the final result has greatly pleased patrons and staff alike. ■