Build, renovate or denote — adapt, grow and thrive

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The management course anecdote goes something like this:

> A team of men (it is always a team of men in management course anecdotes) is building a road though a jungle. For weeks, they have toiled up a particular valley. They have overcome malarial mosquitos, swamps, poisonous reptiles, and terrible heat. The leader, a fore-sighted man, sees a tall tree on a high hill, and has climbed to the top — from this vantage point he can see both ahead and behind. Suddenly he shouts down 'Turn back — we're in the wrong valley!'
>
> To which the foreman on the ground shouts back 'Shut up — we're making good progress'

We in libraries are increasingly in the position of that leader when it comes to library facilities. A recent seminar held in Melbourne under the title *Build, renovate or detonate,* focussed on the future of library buildings.

The seminar covered an eclectic range of subjects — with the common theme of buildings. Speakers discussed the role of the public building, the future and present impact of digital technology, the parts played by various stakeholders, and the meaning of library spaces.

The message throughout was clear — as it will be to *inCite* readers — that libraries have not only recognised the impact of the digital revolution, they have adopted it, adapted to it, and are investing heavily in digital technology.

Possibly the most interesting aspect of the day was the assumption that libraries would take such a leading role. While speakers varied in their assessment of the degree to which libraries have already embraced this 'new age', it was only a question of degree rather than principle.

Another assumption was that public libraries would continue to play the vital role they have always played, that is 'the great equaliser'. Since the 19th century's Mechanics' Institutes and Carnegie libraries were built, to today's provision of digital information through public libraries, the philosophy of welcoming all with 'a desire to know' has not changed to any great degree.

This wholesale adoption of the digital milieu has not been limited to public libraries. On many tertiary campuses, the library was one of the first publicly web-accessible services, and many libraries had web-sites before most other sections of their academic community.

School libraries and librarians have also been 'early adopters' of technology in their own community. In many schools, the library is still the only place students have internet access for non-assignment type work. Teacher-librarians have been diligent in proselytising for information literacy, both in the classroom, and acting on a more direct basis, by teaching thousands of students each week about the wonders, and problems of web-based materials.

All of this has resulted in a richer, and more challenging work environment for all of us — providing substance to the Chinese curse 'may you live in interesting times'. In my own library service, the seeming duality (which is really a multiplicity) of the print versus digital format question provides us with constant challenges.

One of the Councils my library serves is building a new 1800 square metre library building. They decided, after some considerable thought, to provide 1.8 million dollars for books, and traditional print material. They have also allowed for nearly forty pubic access workstations. The reasoning was fairly simple — our service has about 4000 people who visit our libraries each day. Those who ask for help almost always start their request with the words 'I'm looking for a book on...' — even if the best source for the information they are looking for may not be a book, it could be a video, a DVD, or a web-site.

The reality is that we are often moving faster than our users, or our community — a perception not shared by all, especially the web-based search engine which has been running a TV campaign which focuses on their version of a typical librarian. Our user communities are gradually catching up with that reality. Who knows, maybe even the media will come to grips with what libraries do today. ∎