

An Evolution of Library Planning

With the continuing digitisation of materials, the concept of a 'library collection' has been redefined and no longer will necessarily refer to just the physical manifestation of books, periodicals, records and tapes. Librarians have been or will be pressured to justify their role in what appears to be, on the surface, a shift from being information-centred to a decentralised digital/internet-based model. The challenge for libraries of the future is to understand their role in an environment where access to information is diverse and increasingly remotely accessible.

Wilson Architects have been actively exploring this changing role of the library for the past twelve years and have participated in an evolution of library planning, taking the library from collection-centric, to client-centred in the '90s, to experience-centred in the '00s and now connected experiences in the later part of this decade.

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I normally begin most discussions about libraries with a pre-conditional statement about me not being a librarian. My role as an architect has, over the years, changed from simply one of a good listener, to a role which reflects my passion for the theory of the design and service delivery models and the way we engage with information and technology which potentially can have a profound affect on the way we participate in these spaces.

This conversation is often driven by asking such diverse questions as: Is there a need for people in the future to actually visit a library? What can a library provide that a coffee shop cannot? What can a library facilitate that cannot be done at home? The answer to this question is buried somewhere in the formulae: **people + information + interaction + skilled support = library**

If any one of these elements is missing, the library is significantly underperforming. (Note that technology is not singled out as it should be seamlessly embedded.)

People — without people the library is an archive. It is important to be inclusive to all people types. We usually try to test all spaces to see if it accommodates three different types of people:

- The introvert — the need to be able to retreat into the space and quietly reflect/absorb/engage/interact with information.
- The exhibitionist — the need for people to actively participate in the space to be able to engage/interact with people and information.
- The voyeur — the need for people to passively participate in the space to engage/interact with people and information.

This translates into a design by creating a variety of places within the library for groups and individuals working in quiet and active spaces in both formal and informal arrangements.

I am presently involved in a research project with the University of Queensland on Next Generation Learning Spaces, examining the nexus between space, pedagogy and technology. This study is critical in understanding the way students/people engage in the process of learning in an unstructured learning environment. The same sort of spaces we find in the public spaces of any good library.

It is important to distinguish between **information and interaction**. Information is relatively static whereas interaction is filled with the potential to take the information whether it is in print, digital or another person/people to another level of experience. The fact that digital information is scalable means that the number of people who can simultaneously participate increases.

We were fortunate enough to have won a competition to design a new public library for the Armidale Dumaresque Shire in NSW. One of the dominant design strategies for this is the integration of the library to the existing urban fabric of Armidale both physically and symbolically. The town has very few ways to support various community groups. It is interesting to note that universities often face the same dilemma with various study groups. Existing options for such groups seem to be limited to home-based, coffee



Photos: Scott Burrows

Part of UQ's redeveloped library

shop, or finding ad hoc space. The new library in Armidale addresses this issue in a flexible open plan with a series of 'organic' semi-transparent, enclosed, collaborative 'pods' which both define and subtly divide a two-storey volume. The library will be able to support various cohorts with the added ability to tap directly into the historic town hall which has been seamlessly integrated.

Skilled support is the area which probably has undergone the most significant change. Initially a librarian facilitated access to the print material and direction content (i.e. where are the toilets?) The digital revolution has meant the complexities of the queries have required a different service model. A model we have been exploring is where the information desk is replaced with a triage desk. This staffed support is where 60–70% of queries can be simply answered. Anything more complex and the query is referred to either a librarian or an IT professional. This model can potentially free up more time for experienced staff to 'work' the floor. Dedicated consultation areas also allow people to get quiet uninterrupted support.

Libraries which have enabled appropriate change are creating spaces where people are voting with their feet. The newly refurbished Biological Sciences library at the University of Queensland, for example, has been recording increases in visitations of up 350%. The collection-centric library of the nineteenth century is dead; long live the library.

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