

Great public libraries of the world – a tour



Singapore, Helsinki, Stockholm, Malmö, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Delft, and Hong Kong are wonderful cities with great public libraries, as fifteen Victorians, Queenslanders, and South Australians discovered during a twenty-day, jam-packed tour in October 2008.

The *Great Public Libraries of the World* tour was an initiative of Public Libraries Victoria (formerly Viclink) and was supported by the State Library of Victoria. Christine Mackenzie, CEO of the Yarra Plenty Regional Library Service, was the tour leader.

The tour was promoted as an opportunity for participants to gain new ways of seeing and valuing public libraries, to pick-up specific ideas for innovation in service delivery, and to learn how existing programs could be more effectively delivered. New professional contacts would be established. Above all, participants would return encouraged to look 'outside the square' and to 'think big', and with renewed enthusiasm and determination to lift the standing and the performance of public libraries in Australia. All of this was achieved.

Tour highlights

Twenty-three public libraries were on the itinerary, including capital and regional city main libraries, suburban and growth corridor libraries, and boutique libraries for special groups.

An early highlight was Bishan Library, one of Singapore's newest and busiest libraries, located in a shopping precinct. Opened in 2006, this distinctive library is built over five levels. The colourful glass pods that protrude from the façade are prized private spaces for people to work and relax. It was in Bishan Library that tour participants met the Cybrarian – a telephone connection to an operator in the central library, which customers use if they need reference assistance.

The landmark Amsterdam Central Library is also new. Opened in July 2007, at 28,000 square metres over ten levels it is

Europe's biggest public library. Director Hans van Velsen describes it as an 'adventure library', and 'an open house to all who hunger for knowledge and recreation'.

The refurbishment of Sweden's Malmö City Library was completed in 1999, but tour participants agreed that the huge glass extension, the Calendar of Light, which houses the non-fiction collection, still stands as one of the world's most exquisite library buildings.

Another Swedish library that particularly impressed was The Children's Room in the heart of Stockholm. This library especially for 0–11 year olds is so popular that traffic lights have been installed in the window. When the lights are red customers know that the library is full and that they must wait to enter, or come back another time.

In Helsinki, Library 10 has succeeded in attracting a demographic that largely eludes public libraries. The majority of its users are male and aged between 19 and 35 years. Its focus on music and technology is the key. But it is not just about music for listening to; it's about opportunities to create and perform music. Customers can borrow an instrument, use a recording studio, make a CD, and participate in daily live performances in the library.

Impressions and lessons

Much of the learning was around stunning library architecture and creative interior design. Participants were especially impressed by the high level of investment in public library infrastructure, by the extensive opening hours of most libraries, by service trends that are all about enriching the library experience for customers, and by the inspirational leadership in many of the libraries visited. The learning was immense. As Beck Henshall, Manager, Libraries and Learning, Frankston City Council said,

"I think I've taken in 3 years of learning in 3 weeks! Not only were the libraries and staff we met in each country inspiring, resourceful, and innovative thinkers, so too were my fellow travelling companions. The discussions on planes, trains, and buses were just as valuable as the tour stops"

A full report on the *Great Public Libraries of the World* tour and a photo album can be found at <http://www.libraries.vic.gov.au/cgi-bin/infonet/org.cgi?detail=1&id=55>

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Libraries Australia and OCLC: rapid record sharing

In January 2009, the Online Computer Library Centre (OCLC) and Libraries Australia began to use SRU Record update, an exciting new method for ensuring that WorldCat receives records from Libraries Australia in real time. This data synchronisation will benefit Australian libraries and ensure that Australian library data in WorldCat, the global library catalogue, is up-to-date.

After the Dutch Union Catalogue, Libraries Australia is the second service in the world to use SRU Record Update to WorldCat. Greater benefits can be achieved as more libraries implement the protocol. The National Library of Australia recommends that libraries consider including SRU Record Update support when they are purchasing new library management systems, or requesting enhancements.

The successful implementation of this program is due to the hard work and skill of staff at OCLC in Dublin and Leiden, and the National Library of Australia. We would like to thank everyone involved.

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