



Design consultant Kevin Hennah is just about to mark his tenth year working with libraries in Australia and internationally. The long-time retail visual merchandising expert turned workshop presenter, author of Victorian Public Libraries' Image Handbook and featured author of Re-think: Ideas for Inspiring School Library Design, has been pondering what real library design revolution should mean.

His thinking has included consideration of trends that are now truly mainstream – the issue of sustainability, changes in how our patrons use our libraries (from hooking up to the wireless connection to being allowed – even encouraged – to get in a group and make some noise) and the growing popularity of added facilities such as cafes.

But even with all this innovation, Kevin says the risk of just building a trendier version of what we already have is apparently still strong.

"In terms of culture and visual merchandising, there are pre-internet libraries and post-internet libraries," Kevin says. "This has nothing to do with the year the library was built. I am referring to libraries that have simply added the internet to the existing collection and left those resources merchandising in a traditional format. Rows of spine-out books with traditional signage does not compete with Google! There's plenty of life left in print, but we can't present it in a traditional format and expect to achieve the results we did prior to introducing the internet and other new technologies."

"Put everything under the magnifying glass in the design stages," he advises. "Ask yourself, is this layout, system, display and promotional strategy still relevant? I call this cultural weeding."

And he has the figures to prove changing the traditional approach really works. The advent of front-facing displays in libraries, for example, is proven to assist in reversing downward trends in non-fiction loans - even in school libraries where homework cut and pasted from the internet is the despair of many a teacher librarian.

Kevin has many favourite design initiatives but rates South Australia's Mt Gambier Public Library amongst his favourites for its highly strategic design, signage and aesthetic. "It doesn't just look fantastic, it balances

the aesthetic with great visual merchandising and branding," he says.

Other favourites include Concord Public Library in Sydney, which has supplemented Dewey with excellent impulse-driven signage. He is also enthusiastic about Altona North Public Library in Victoria for their installation of completely moveable

service counters: "it's fantastic to see this finally happen," he says, and for a school library with many impressive interior design initiatives he recommends All Saints Primary School Library in Albany Creek, Queensland.

At the moment he's working with a school library in Kuala Lumpur where they are exploring organising the whole collection by genre rather than physical form. In a post-internet world, this makes more sense than ever, not least because it tends to put the internet in its place in the minds of patrons – amongst a variety of resources, not replacing them.

After many years in retail, including the great days of The Body Shop, clients including Virgin Mobile, Australia Post and Oshkosh, and now a decade working with libraries, Kevin says there is something very special about working with staff in libraries, regardless of which sector they are in.

"They are passionate and I love that passion," says Kevin.



Put it all under the magnifying glass when you begin – Kevin Hennah

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## Five things you must get right this time...

Kevin cites five critical factors in the design of a truly revolutionary library space to share:

1. **Aim for total flexibility.** This means adjustable, moveable fittings, from shelves to service counters, to enable you to reinvent your library over time to meet your patron's needs. (And avoid using big expense items such as carpeting to delineate areas – that just cuts down on the essential flexibility because if you move the shelving and furniture it's going to look plain weird!)
2. **Maximise your impulse loan potential.** Use every opportunity for front-facing displays and find a way to

organise your shelves that isn't in traditional aisles. It's about enticing your patrons into the space and showing off what you have.

3. **De-clutter.** There's a world of difference between just weeding the shelves and freeing up space you then use to actively engage with patrons through displays of the great stuff you have. Most libraries have a great deal more in their collection than can be effectively showcased. As Kevin says, "rows of shelves of book spines are truly a 'pre-internet' library notion.

Each month, *OPINION* features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.

Dear Editor

Thank you Philip Kent for your thoughtful and polite reminder to all of the way it was in "our day" (*INCITE*, September 2011). It would seem a reminder like this is timely. So many of the matters that you mention as common practice and that served as a thoughtful, professional and very useful networking training ground for the likes of you and me appear to be missing in the profession as it stands today. You mention:

- How so many staff members at large institutions were almost automatically members of our professional association. I understand that this is not always the case today.
- How we "networked long before the term was in currency" through Committee meetings, to which I would add the steep learning curve these meetings provided in standards of recording meetings, conducting debate, speaking professionally and being well informed before one dared to open one's mouth, and being courteous in formal meeting settings.
- The loss of "professional connection" with the demise of such meetings – to which I can only agree. The meetings gave a sense of professional worth and strength and certainly assisted in times when, for example, employers were hiring librarians without the requirement of "eligible for professional membership of ALIA" as part of the advertisement. You don't see the latter too often these days and as you write, this is the "official standard".

Lest anyone think that this is yet another oldie with a professional gripe, there could be none more astounded than I, when I gave a bit (or is it 'byte') speech at the New Norcia Library Lecture in WA recently, on the philosophical underpinnings of our proud and worthy profession under the rubric of the information commons. How heartening it was to have so many colleagues express their appreciation of this reminder of our true worth and meaning. And if you want a brief reminder of why librarians exist and should continue their proud journey then please read "What librarians & Google are for..." (*INCITE*, August 2011, p. 4) for starters.

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4. **Before you select an architect, ask the contenders what the word 'library' means to them.** If their notion is outdated, you are going to have to either change their mind or re-educate them before you get started. And any architect or designer you choose must share your vision and enthusiasm if you are going to create something really revolutionary together.
5. (And this is actually Kevin's number one priority): **Insist on 3D-rendering of everything during the design process.** Think Grand Designs. That computer-generated building you can actually watch yourself walking through isn't just a fancy trick; it's the way you can be sure you and your architect are imagining the same new library and it saves you from those nasty surprises once the building starts (I thought it would be higher/larger/smaller...). A retail or even a domestic project these days will routinely be 3D-rendered and a project as complex as a library definitely should be.

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