



OPINION

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.

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Places of connection

Angela Hazebroek is a director of Adelaide-based town planning firm Urban and Regional Planning Solutions. Her involvement with libraries goes back decades and, although the library has played many roles in her life over that time, both personally and professionally, she believes the essence of a library is its ability to foster connections.

As a young mum thirty years ago, the library in my local shopping centre at Ingle Farm in South Australia was a meeting place,

a refuge, an intellectual stimulus and an aid to parenting with storytime and school holiday programs, air-conditioning on hot days and shelter when it rained, a book club and stacks of fiction to take me to other places, and non-fiction to help

me understand this place. My library was my most valuable publicly funded service.

These days I am a social planner and privileged to work with councils who are planning to meet the needs of their communities. I am valuing libraries in a whole new way, because these libraries have become the safe, central location to foster debate as plans are developed.

The growing inclusion of cafe facilities near, or in, contemporary libraries makes them great places to engage directly with the community on specific issues where council or other organisations are seeking feedback. Libraries have become the equivalent of the Italian piazza or Greek agora, where the community meets on neutral ground to share information, knowledge and opinion over a good coffee or perhaps some wine and cheese.

Recent examples in which libraries have facilitated community consultation include a meeting in which we used the external walls of the Salisbury Council Library in South Australia for a 'Speak Out' event as part of the *Healthy Eating and Active Travel* project. Council allowed participants access to the toilets and provided healthy food in the plaza in front of the library while the library staff welcomed the temporary value-adding for their walls.

At Gosford City Council NSW, we used the foyer to the library at the Erina Fair Shopping Centre to do mini-interviews with over 100 library users on the topic of *Dogs in Open Spaces*. This proved to be a highly emotional topic that divided community opinion, however the library foyer was a calm space which helped to defuse the atmosphere. Using this location also enabled us to connect with young mothers bringing their children to storytime, older people returning and borrowing books, teenagers participating in a youth event and artists hanging an

exhibition. In this safe space we were able to hear and record the full range of community views.

In outer metropolitan areas and regional cities, the rapid pace of residential development often fails to keep pace with the social infrastructure and community facilities needed by the new residents. There are no longer any meeting halls and few centres where services such as health checks, parenting programs and fitness activities can be offered. Often in a new suburb there is no school for the first few years and children may be driven

to schools out of the area. Opportunities for the casual encounter in a safe place that sparks a relationship are frequently totally missing.

Into this vacuum steps the library. Libraries are known and trusted as safe and inclusive places. They

are generally central and accessible places where people from the physically and socially disconnected suburbs in urban growth areas make the connections they and their families need to begin to feel a sense of belonging.

When ten year old boys who live down the street from each other but go to different schools met at a library program for example, this trusted space engendered enough trust in their parents to let them develop a friendship that took them to the neighbourhood skate park, recreation centre and linear park. So the library has broadened their horizons in more ways than one and, as an added bonus, their mothers too have become friends.

As urban, regional and social planners, my team collaborates with architects, landscape architects, curators of cultural collections, ecological sustainability practitioners, community development workers, and library staff to develop and enhance the way libraries meet the needs of their communities. One of the key criteria the consultant team always adopts is that "the design and location of libraries must reflect their continual evolution as the primary places of connection for people." They will be places where people can connect with ideas, with creativity, with the world and with each other.

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A LIBRARY WALL BECOMES A TEMPORARY BILLBOARD TO ATTRACT PARTICIPATION IN A COMMUNITY CONSULTATION