

# LIS: INVESTIGATIONS

Where ALIA's Research Committee brings you news from the world of library and information services research.

## FROM OUR COLLECTION:

Nimmo, Andrew. "An architect's perspective – how to encourage genuine innovation in library design". *Australian Library Journal* 61:3, (2012): 200-6.

Norman, Mark. "Frail, fatal, fundamental: the future of public libraries". *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services* 25:2, (2012): 94-100.

Perrault, Anne Marie & Levesque, Aimee M. "Caring for all students". *Knowledge Quest* 40:4, (2012):16-7.

Getting the right fit between a library and users is an ever evolving environment. Libraries are no longer archetypal, but with constant refurbishment and build of new spaces and constructs, design plays an ever increasing central role in the right fit for all who use a library. The right fit is not a 'now thing', but has been evolving for a number of years. It is perhaps now that library design is actually considering users within this concept. Both of the Australian articles presented provide welcome content for the use of library spaces, while the third article discusses this from a school perspective.

Nimmo, an architect, explores the process of innovation in spatial design and the process of design, "...an interactive design...between architects, librarians and stakeholders". This is a welcome statement. The process as outlined seems to provide a worthy consensus outcome. Nimmo looks at two projects he has been involved in, refurbishing the UNSW Menzies Library, a ten year venture, and a green fields build for the Gold Coast City Council, a somewhat quicker outcome. Critical is expounding one's first principle: what are we actually going to do? A three stage workshop process is explored, from basic concepts to the final master design.

Further, "...new libraries are often an eclectic assembly of design components...without a coherent framework for strategic intent" To overcome this, a qualitative "workshop process" was used and described in some detail, to include all stakeholders. Through this process all gain insight on issues outside their own areas of concern and, likewise, all gain insight of others' concerns. The stakeholders become part of the process and not just onlookers accepting a fait accompli, and the final product, a consensus model of

design. A parallel process, separate consultative meetings as the kernel of the working design, is also essential, as this is where the first principles are made into practicalities. Data such as visits, loans, and various uses are important as this quantitative area then supports and fuses with the qualitative, supporting the initial move to refurbish or build.

What are we looking for when it comes to design for use? This has to be the basis of any move to redesign libraries and their spaces: flexible spaces, fewer books, more digital access, a communal/social centre. One gets a sense that the process is lengthy and requires commitment from all for the betterment of the communal environment. The formal process has

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solid merit, particularly as there are varying inputs for a costly building.

Norman's views (a Sydney-based librarian) are broad, challenging, and in the public domain, in that in order for public libraries to survive, they must and are regenerating their roles, constantly repositioning themselves to take advantage and align themselves with their paying communities. The community (users) must be at the table; they cannot be ignored. The issues raised can be articulated for both tertiary and many school libraries, all finding themselves in a similar position. The many topics briefly discussed are realistic, and intertwining throughout the article is the user. What does the user want from the design of spaces? How are libraries reimagining services and their place in society, both in general and in particular?

Perrault and Levesque's small article begins with a quote from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a text well known to most from secondary school. It is this connection that they use to look at library design from the point of view of the student. The term "empathic design" offers a means of empathy,

putting oneself in place of another, such as organisations to better understand users' needs. The concept is taken from an earlier article and used in their article as a "relatively low cost, low risk way to identify potentially critical customer needs". One would think this applied in terms of time and finance. Again quantitative data is useful to add weight to change. Complementing this is the qualitative aspect; that is, observing the user in the environment and how the user engages, what they do or don't do.

They discuss a relatively easy five-step process, in contrast to Nimmo's detailed design process. "The empathic process offers a proactive and purposeful strategy to offer fully inclusive programs and services". It is not articulated in any

detail, but others can get a snap shot of its characteristics and, if interested, the reader is lead to investigate the original article.

Empathic design addresses unarticulated user needs – its strongest feature. This user-centred approach becomes an intimate model as distinct from a more structured model.

One gets the sense that library design of today is about legitimising the users, their use of the space, the services they require, and not so much about collection. It is the users who are driving library use. This is a critical factor to remember at all stages of design and, ultimately, the practicalities of daily use. To be flexible now, in 10, or 20 years – libraries must have built-in fluidity.

What users need, their experiences, how are they articulated, establishing a broad consensus for the final design is paramount and one can only wish that such detailed processes really infiltrate the design process so that users and libraries are one fit.

These offerings provide solid insight and practical directions for all stakeholders to contribute and make the library experience an ever evolving and collaborative environment. Proactive connections is the future for libraries and users.

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