FUTURE
LIBRARIES

A rup has recently released a report which considers what the future library might look like. KIM SHERWIN, one of the report's authors, outlines the research and some key findings.

The aim was to identify trends and set benchmarks for the future design, operation and function of libraries in public, academic and corporate environments. The research identifies factors that will affect organisations providing library services and users of those services. Whether we access libraries physically or digitally, the report indicates what we may expect to see, feel and do in the library of the future.

Key findings from the research include:

BE FLEXIBLE, AGILE AND ADAPTABLE

Library spaces, services, funding models and operations will need to be flexible and adaptable to futureproof libraries. With the fast pace of change and the rapid expansion of the digital environment, user expectations will change. Building agility into libraries will be crucial in sustaining and redefining their purpose.

NOURISH LEARNING

Rather than being relegated to the first two decades of our life, learning is increasingly becoming an ongoing part of our professional and personal lives. Lifelong learning can be casual or formal and is enhanced by the on-the-go access to information provided by mobile devices. As libraries are quintessential places for learning, the spaces they inhabit and the services they offer will need to be transformed to meet future expectations. Seamless access to the physical and digital space will be critical to meet user needs, particularly as learning models evolve.

BUILD PARTNERSHIPS

Partnering with other organisations to provide sustainable funding models, as well as involving the local community in the delivery of relevant services, resources and experiences, will be crucial for libraries. Whatever community libraries serve, crowdsourcing and crowdfunding initiatives will give that community a sense of ownership of their library.

OFFER SAFE SPACES

Libraries have a key role to play in community identity. They provide an egalitarian connection to resources, knowledge and services. Many libraries serve disadvantaged communities, providing access regardless of ethnicity, age, gender or sexuality. They are non-judgmental places where people can explore the world anonymously, privately and securely. Libraries support the connection to the fast-paced digital world but must also provide for those who seek solace in the physical space. Libraries are community hubs, places to exchange ideas, to open minds and to provide shelter and companionship. New designs, functions and purposes for the physical space are inevitable, but the concept of equal access and opportunity remains a constant.
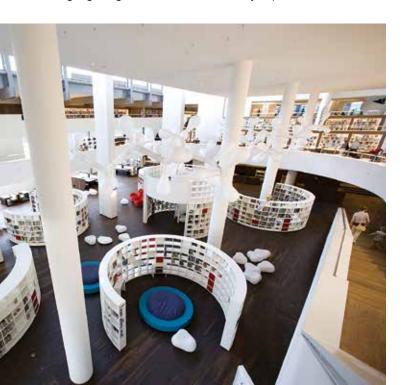
LIBRARIAN AS FACILITATOR

Having flexible skills and the ability to work with other disciplines will become more important as the librarian of the future assumes an enhanced role as trusted adviser. Information overload will place new demands on library staff as people pursue more individual and personalised interactions. The role of the librarian to provide unbiased information, to guide on digital literacy and to educate on cyber security and privacy will be crucial. What lies ahead is largely unknown, but in a world of fast-paced change this research has shown that the future is opportunity-rich for libraries and librarians.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The research grew from workshops held in Sydney, Melbourne, San Francisco and London, and over 100 participants attended, including stakeholders with backgrounds in the design, operation and management of libraries. The research used Arup Foresight's Drivers of Change tool to facilitate workshop conversation, stretching the participants to think in terms of macro-societal 'drivers' or topics that prompt change. These topics are organised into five categories, or lenses, based on their main area of impact: Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, and Political, or STEEP. Participants were split into groups and asked to select those trends most relevant to them based on personal interest, background, perceived importance and regional relevance.

The discussions varied in the different regions. Sydney focused predominantly on the future role and function of libraries. Melbourne looked at digital experiences and discovery, while San Francisco explored the future design and operation of library buildings. London's workshop centred on funding. This global perspective resulted in a rich and diverse approach.

The research brings together salient trends and, with the aid of user stories and case studies, extensively analyses implications. User stories provide potential scenarios and highlight significant features of library experiences in 2025.

Kim Sherwin

This report is a product of the Arup University. By investing in tools, skills and people, Arup University helps deliver excellence, foster technical expertise and encourage a unique design culture. A core function of Arup University is its library service which supports and shapes this agenda.

To access the report: publications.arup.com/Publications/F/Future_Libraries.aspx

What do you think future libraries will be like? Join in the conversation here: fieldsofactivity.com/future-libraries/

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