

# Expanding Our Horizons Developing Strategies for the 21st Century

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The substantial changes soon to become evident at the State Library of Queensland are more than just physical. They represent a renewal of the institution, based on a reappraisal of the ways the library can benefit the communities it serves, and an acknowledgement of change being one of the few constants in 21<sup>st</sup> century life.

Change can be very unsettling. Libraries have always seemed so essential - but which of us hasn't honestly felt a bit threatened by Google, by huge electronic databases which seem to cut out the need for a "person" to help find something, or by the fact that Amazon can deliver a book far more quickly and cheaply than the average interlibrary loans service? The need for us to do many of the things we've always done is diminishing. A recent article in *The Guardian* newspaper reported the prediction of the demise of public libraries by 2020. We need to be very clear-eyed about the relevance of our practice but at the same time take courage from the fact that the human needs that libraries were established to address still endure. Our challenge is to keep pace with meeting those needs in ways that ensure our own continuing relevance.

What then is the vision guiding us at the State Library of Queensland, during this period of reappraisal? I will backtrack a little bit to my taking up the position as State Librarian in Queensland at the end of 2001. I was very fortunate to arrive at a time quite unique in the history of the State Library, and for that matter in any library's lifetime. Cabinet had just endorsed 'Smart Libraries Build

Smart Communities: Future Directions of the State Library', which had been developed after extensive community consultation; a new library management system was about to be installed which provided a platform not only for an improved library catalogue, but also for digital service delivery; and the library was in the last phase of architect selection process for the Millennium Library Project (MLP) which was part of the \$280 million Millennium Arts Project. Shortly after the successful architectural consortia was announced, the architect, the library's MLP Project Manager, myself and a representative of the Department of Public Works embarked on an overseas trip to look at best-practice libraries. The group make-up was important, if all were to have a common understanding of what we wanted to achieve through the new Millennium Arts Library. We visited four countries, 28 different 'sites' in 18 days -- as you can imagine we brought back lots of photos and ideas. Staff asked, what was your favourite place? So, in response to this, we developed a framework which we have called our Six Spheres and have used this as our guiding principles, not only for the building, but for our services, and our staff.

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The six spheres are an accessible place, a place of transformation, a virtual place, a place of interaction, a place with atmosphere, and a voice in its place.

### **An accessible place**

What makes an accessible place? Is it being able to be dropped off at the front door? Is it the look and feel of the place? Is it the staff? For that matter what is an accessible librarian? Is it a place where our collection is accessible? It is of course all of these things.

A familiar problem for all of us is to make the riches that we hold accessible to our current clients and beyond. For the State Library with a state-wide role, our challenge is to provide physical and virtual environments and a range of supporting systems to enable everyone to navigate the library's huge range of resources *freely, comprehensively* and with the greatest of ease. Clients should be able to focus on *engaging* with resources rather than finding them. Within the State Library's vast domain, whether physical or virtual, we want our clients to feel a sense of discovery and a sense of possibility.

We must also attend to differing needs and motivations. The library has to cater for clients motivated by a general desire to educate or enrich themselves, as much as for clients with very specific research needs. We also have to make the library a place which is accessible to children and families. This is something that is a whole new journey for the State Library to think about, how we make our services, collections and programs accessible to this audience.

The *place* itself also has to be easy to access, especially for people who have special physical needs. Importantly, the State Library provides a rare opportunity for individuals to experience community: *all* citizens can enter the library and feel, in an unqualified way, that they *belong*, that the place is *theirs* as much as it is the stranger's next to them.

### **A constantly transforming place**

The Library as a place of transformation is something that we as librarians are very aware of. Each contact with a book, a piece of information, with expert staff, with other people in the library is in some way a transformation. Libraries serve literally to expand the minds of their clients

– *transformation* is a key function. Transformation involves growth, venturing out of familiar territory. You can look over the occupants of a library reading room and wonder at all the small intellectual miracles occurring behind furrowed brows and unblinking eyes, the minds reaching out for ever more complex understanding, the imagination transforming abstract concepts into new ideas. It is these sorts of processes we want to *externalise* in the library's physical and virtual spaces.

The emphasis in the new library will be on *linking* or *connecting* - linking people to each other, and linking the library itself with the life and preoccupations and aspirations of its communities. Those links, like life itself, will be restless and ever-changing.

The spaces in the new building are being designed for maximum flexibility. A space used for a display one week may be used for a poetry reading or a community forum the week after. The library's spaces will adapt seamlessly to the needs of its communities.

### **A virtual place**

Through its redeveloped website the State Library will have a revitalised existence independent of its physical spaces. We want the website to function *like* the building, to be a *place* as powerfully as the building will be a place.

Most people's experience of the virtual tends to be confined to solitary private spaces, perhaps ironic given that the Internet could be described as the biggest "public space" in the world. Despite the enormous associative power of virtual domains, the most profound effect of immersion in them is isolation and alienation. At the State Library we're interested in exploring synergies between real and virtual public domains, and making the immersion in the virtual an enriching and rewarding, not isolating, experience.

### **A place of interaction**

I have already touched upon the State Library being a place where people can experience *community*. In public libraries your right to occupy space, use resources, be treated with respect, without having to pay anything or otherwise establish your status or credentials, is a given. We are proud of the fact that in our reading rooms people from every conceivable background happily coexist.

A sense of community involves a sense of the *others* with whom it is shared. Libraries are a vital part of the infrastructure sustaining the sense of community and building cohesiveness and social capital. The State Library will participate in the life of the community more than ever before - through Brisbane-based programs and activities, through outreach programs, through the website, and by sharing ideas and encouraging conversations – no longer the sssshh from the remote librarian sitting at the registration desk.

### A place with atmosphere

One of the lessons learned from our overseas trip was the importance of authenticity of place. As the world goes global, more and more the local takes on greater importance. As an institution the State Library is representative of the core values of the liberal democratic state. Its physical and virtual *fabric* should project this status. Our aspirations will be matched by architecture and design. The new building will be a testament to the faith and confidence invested in the institution and will serve as a powerful emblem of Queensland's ideals.

Our Library will be an authentic *public* building, a building for our special place: the river, the city, Indigenous connection, the Southbank educational precinct, a cultural precinct. The library will speak a language of care for and interest in the communities in which it stands. The architecture will be generous and expressive, inviting the public's pride and delight.

### A voice in its place

We are the custodians of the knowledge and history of *this place* – the Queensland in which we live and in which our children and their children will live. The notion of ourselves as *knowledge ancestors* must shape and drive our thinking about the collections we build and the services we offer. What will they think about us, in 50, 100 or 150 years? What we left behind, what we valued enough to protect and preserve, will stand as a record of our values and our spirit – a hugely challenging and exciting idea for us to grapple with. Our values become central and compelling when we consider the spiritual journey from our present to the future.

Our library will be a place in which past and present voices can play, in which the acts of speaking and listening are honoured. For Indigenous peoples, the original occupants of this place, the *land* itself still speaks with its own voice, is a repository of accumulated wisdom. We honour and celebrate

this through the establishment of Indigenous Knowledge Centres around the State and in the new building at South Brisbane.

Investing place with meaning is of course a universal cultural practice. Queenslanders cherish the memories of the mango tree in the backyard, the squabble of bats on hot summer nights, cattle and cane, blue skies and thunderheads, curling up on the back seat of the Kingswood on interminable drives to the beach. We delight in the uniqueness of this place. Place is part of us and binds us. We need the reassurance of its many voices.



### Conclusion

How we as librarians face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is shaped by the values we hold dear, and the dreams we have about the endless possibilities of tomorrow. We might have to acknowledge that what we knew yesterday won't meet the needs of next week or next year. But I believe that one thing we can count on is the *need to know* that has always engaged the human spirit and intellect. Life is a journey to discovery. It's up to us to get front row seats on the trip.

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