Endless Possibilities at the Library at The Dock

Abstract: The doors of the Library at The Dock, in the Docklands precinct of Melbourne, Australia, opened in late May 2014. This was the culmination of a long journey of planning and design work for a brand new urban development in the city, where the vision of a public library as the heart of a modern community had been embraced by government, developers, architects, librarians, and future customers. This article describes the endless possibilities that have become reality for this contemporary library through strategic partnerships and innovative architectural design. It is also just the beginning of the next journey, as a new and modern library facility which represents the endless possibilities of the building, the programs and services it provides, new staffing models, and all the passionate users.

Keywords: Public libraries; library design; library services; community development; Melbourne; Australia

1 Introduction

“Welcome to Melbourne, Australia!” (Tourism Victoria, 2014) Melbourne is the second biggest city in this vast country and, as the capital of the state of Victoria, it is a vibrant centre for the arts, culture and education. In August 2014, Melbourne was named the world’s most liveable city for the fourth year running (ABC News, 2014). While the larger metropolitan area of Greater Melbourne, with a population of almost 4.5 million, is administered by a number of local authorities, the City of Melbourne represents the central hub of the metropolis. It currently has a population of 116,500 but is growing fast: it topped the national population growth rates with a staggering increase of 23% over the 12 months to June 2013 and it is anticipated that the population will double by 2020.

Population growth drives urban development. In recent years, a major urban renewal project has been undertaken in the Docklands precinct of Melbourne which has considerably increased the area of the central city. The developers have focused on the possibilities offered by living and working in a modern harbour side environment. As Docklands has also become the address for the head offices of a number of major Australian companies and government agencies, the area has quickly become a vital destination for over 40,000 commuters. Significantly, design and innovation have become key features of Docklands and are evident in the fresh and exciting architectural structures.

The development of this new city landscape has encouraged urban planners to consider the human factors to ensure that the buildings and the public spaces work well for residents, workers and visitors, to foster a real sense of community. Victoria Harbour has become the civic heart of Docklands with the creation of a waterfront neighbour-
hood where there is a blend of residential dwellings, commercial, retail and dining facilities and recreational spaces.

Urban development drives public library services. In Australia, a number of studies have been undertaken to present the evidence about the social, cultural, economic and economic value of public libraries (Library Council of New South Wales, 2008; SGS Economics and Planning, 2011; SGS Economics and Planning, 2012; SGS Economics and Planning, 2013). As it is widely acknowledged that public libraries represent a key dimension of successful and sustainable communities, it was decided very early on in the planning for Docklands that investment in a library and community centre would be a critical factor.

In 2012, work was commenced on the ambitious project to build the Library at The Dock. The project itself was a cornerstone of the Victorian government’s Docklands Community and Place Plan which aimed to establish Docklands as one of the most liveable suburbs in the country. From the outset, the new library, described as “a world class multi-purpose facility that will revitalise the face of Docklands” (City of Melbourne, 2013), capitalised on the possibilities of innovative planning activities: through strategic partnerships, through the architectural design, through the development of new service models and through innovative approaches to library staffing.

2 Strategic partnerships

A unique partnership model was established between the City of Melbourne, Places Victoria (the state government’s property development agency) and Lend Lease (a major property and infrastructure developer) to bring the new civic space to reality. With an investment of $23 million (over $15 million Euros), the partnership has successfully brought together state and local governments, the private sector, local organisations and the community to create an amenity that would encourage people to meet, explore, learn, and relax.

3 Architectural design

The design of the building itself was ambitious. The challenge was to make the most of the possibilities of the chosen location, to develop an aesthetically pleasing building which provided a practical engineering solution. In particular, consideration had to be given to the weight-bearing issues associated with the original wharf. The fact that the wharf was constructed on ironbark pilings was important: ironbark has long been proven a very strong and durable Australian timber supporting industrial and port activities. The architects proposed using the wharf as the foundation for a contemporary three storey rectangular building constructed from recycled hardwood and cross laminated timber (CLT). CLT is a prefabricated timber material which is as strong as,
but much lighter than concrete, and allows for modern exciting and flexible structures in unconventional construction settings.

Compared to residential buildings where CLT is commonly used, the library building required large spans of glulam beams supported by columns to create the desired open space. The construction materials were actually sourced from Austria, with all CLT components designed to fit together perfectly to create the structure. A total of 1,600 sections were shipped in 21 containers and then installed on site using 55,000 special screws. Throughout the building the attractive qualities of recycled native timbers, including tallowwood, spotted gum and ironbark, provide a striking visual contrast with the modern CLT and glulam materials. The exterior cladding and promenade decking also uses recycled timber which will continue to age gradually and gracefully.

The library is the first public building to be awarded a 6-Star Green Star rating by the Green Building Council of Australia. This is a sustainable building designed to achieve low energy consumption by taking advantage of natural light and passive ventilation to create a positive indoor environment. Solar panels on the roof support the energy needs and rain water collected from the roof is used within the building. In recognition of these design features, the Library at The Dock has won the Sustainability Award the 2014 Australian Timber Design Awards.

4 New service models

The City of Melbourne recognised that while public libraries have long been regarded as essential and enduring physical structures, the contemporary world demands a focus on the services that can encourage and support the myriad of opportunities for active community participation. The Library at The Dock has been described as a community meeting point where people can come together to create, explore, connect, belong, learn, and participate: “A haven of quiet. A place of progressive debate. A visitor’s study break and a worker’s escape. A multi-purpose library for the 21st Century” (Lend Lease, 2014). If the library was to become a real community hub, then it was essential that members of the Docklands community expressed their own ideas about the possibilities for their new space.

The city council engaged design consultants, Huddle, to focus on service design to ensure that customer expectations were balanced by organisational capability (Huddle, 2014). The consultants profiled the potential user groups, including residents, visitors and workers, and then hosted a number of focus groups to explore and discuss what each group needed and wanted from their new community space. Huddle adopted a range of collaborative approaches to co-design the outcomes that would align the user experience with the building itself, with the programs and services and with the staffing.

5 New staffing models

An open approach to staffing was adopted for the new library. Instead of advertising traditional library roles, they called expressions of interest from people who would like to create new roles where they could contribute their skills to this new environment, stressing the importance of the community space and the creative space they would be working in. Once again, the focus was on the possibilities that could emerge and evolve: the dynamic library manager, Paula Kelly, explained that working at the Library at
The Dock would require a generative, inclusive mindset to facilitate ways “to animate the space” (Kelly, 2014). The result has been the creation of a highly committed team with a wide range of skills, a dedicated service orientation and a shared, passionate desire to provide a unique and inspiring experience for everyone who comes to the library.

6 The results

The Library at The Dock opened its doors at the end of May 2014. The design and development of the building itself had already attracted a lot of attention in the local community; the focus groups had also succeeded in building immense anticipation and enticing people to become engaged with the possibilities of this contemporary environment. The underlying philosophy is that this is a place where everyone is welcome and where the heart of a brand new community can evolve organically. The three floors offer a range of spaces that can be used in many different ways. As a physical space, houses the 40,000 print and 20,000 multimedia resources: this collection reflects the interests of the different groups who use the library, especially those in the business sector. It is already proving to be a high demand, fast moving collection. There is a bright children’s area where colourful seating invites families to relax and read together or use the interactive screens on the walls and in the floor which encourage children to discover and explore.

Creativity and connectivity are foremost here: there is a recording studio, professional editing suites and soundproof practice rooms. The technology hub encompasses a high-end digital design suite, 3D makerspaces and a gaming zone, all of which provide the locus for many different formal and informal learning activities. Further spaces are dedicated to wider community interests: a 120 seat performing arts venue, community meeting rooms and a heritage gallery to house exhibitions curated either by library staff or by local history groups. The usable areas extend beyond the walls to the outdoor timber deck opening onto the waterfront and the rooftop garden overlooking the urban park at Dock Square, providing the community with a shared open air space to enjoy televised sporting and cultural events.

The Library at The Dock has already proved itself to be a new and exciting community facility where people can ‘come and be’, ‘come and meet’, ‘come and do’ or ‘come and create’. It is a modern and surprising library that really does represent the endless possibilities of the building, the programs and services, the staff and each individual user.

7 Take a tour

Library at The Dock: www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSv1l9kWv_k
Library at The Dock, Docklands, Melbourne: www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIEh3EWVLZY
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