"There and Back Again": Reimagining the Public Library for the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

The redefining of the scope and function of the public library in the twenty-first century, and reconstruction of the virtual and physical space it occupies, appear to have taken public libraries on a journey to "there and back again." In some of the debates surrounding contemporary challenges, we can discern echoes from previous generations as they too debated the primary role of the public library in the community, the nature and purpose of services and resources provided, and the best way to meet community needs. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, many of the solutions reached by twenty-first century libraries have much in common with the solutions of previous generations. Reflecting early public library activities, today's responses include the introduction of nonstandard classification schemes; the expansion of programs to enhance recreational and educational pursuits; the integration of multiple community services within the library; and provision of a variety of community learning, creative, and recreational spaces. Using the development of public libraries in Australia as a case study, and a critical narrative approach, this paper will argue that the vision for the function and purpose of the public library in the twenty-first century is not a new one but, perhaps unconsciously, a return to historical foundations.

The twenty-first century has presented many challenges for public libraries, and they have sought to meet some of these challenges by reimagining their place in their communities and the way they deliver their services. Historically, libraries have manifested themselves in relation to their perceived contemporary purpose: as a symbol of democracy and freedom; temple of learning and advocate of civilization and high culture; university of the common man; a place of collective memory; or as social and

civic space. If the library space in particular is also considered as a symbolic space that represents "the material forms that culture takes within the social landscape" (Augst, 2001, p. 5) and a "manifestation" of a community's aspirations (Gorman, 2003, p. 5), as suggested by commentators, such changes invite examination. Using the historical development of community libraries in Australia as a case study, and a critical narrative approach, this paper will argue that the vision for the function and purpose of the "community hub" public library in twenty-first century Australia is not a new one but, perhaps unconsciously, a return to the foundations of the early Australian community libraries as found in the many schools of arts, mechanics' institutes, and atheneums.

The re-redefining of the scope and function of the public library, and reconstruction of the virtual and physical space it occupies in the twenty-first century, appear to have taken public libraries on a journey to "there and back again" (Tolkien, 1972). In some of the contemporary debates addressing the challenges presented by changing social and technological conditions, we can discern echoes from previous generations. They too debated the primary role of the library in a changing community, the nature and purpose of services and resources provided, and the best way to meet future community needs. We can trace the evolution of the library space from its role as a social and community enterprise in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Kaufman, 1967, p. 5), through to the mid-nineteenth-century vision of the public library as a practical manifestation for the provision of opportunity, for education, and as a purveyor of civilizing culture. The twentieth century saw the growth of publically funded civic infrastructure with the establishment of council-run services and facilities such as town halls, health services, and public libraries. Such services were no longer driven by the community and represented a shift toward a more generic "professional" approach. The emergence of these services heralded, in many ways, the end of the institutes as community hubs as the focus shifted to newer facilities operated by paid professionals such as librarians.

During the twentieth century, libraries and librarians worked toward the establishment of standardized, routine, and common modes of practice. These "modern" practices, with their origins in the United States (Kraske, 1985, p. 4), were to some extent divorced from the needs of the individual community in which the library was located and were aimed at promoting the professionalization of librarians and libraries. This was particularly marked in Australia following publication of the somewhat controversial "Munn–Pitt Report" on the state of Australian libraries (Munn & Pitt, 1935). The report considered libraries of all types and declared that Australia's institutes were then "moribund" and should be replaced by tax-funded municipal public libraries staffed by professionally

educated librarians. The report noticeably raised awareness of libraries, and the history of libraries in Australia is sometimes delineated as "AM," before Munn, and "PM," after Munn. Today, the emergence of a "new" vision of many public libraries as "community hubs" in response to social changes appears to see the narrative relating to library space coming full circle as they once again take on the mantle of a social and community enterprise.

Such changes reflect a shift in both the professional landscape of librarians and in the changing environment in which they work. These changing conditions include economic and governmental pressures limiting access to freely available social and community spaces supported by local and national governments, and an increasingly isolated and less engaged population. A contraction of civic infrastructure has existed in many rural Australian communities for some time with banks, hospitals, and schools closing, and emigration of the local population. As a result libraries in country towns have often become a de facto central point for community engagement. The current decline of civic infrastructure, both urban and rural, in many ways mirrors conditions found in the many small towns scattered throughout the countryside in nineteenth century Australia. These early communities were not in decline but responded to the need for communal space and educational and recreational facilities as they developed by establishing institutions that the various colonies called schools of arts, mechanics institutes, and atheneums. The conditions under which they were established were unlike those in the United States and the U.K., where increasing industrialization and population density, coupled with a decline in the traditional "trade" system and the growth of the "mechanic," saw such institutions emerge. In Australia the communities were small, often rural, with strong aspirational and egalitarian agendas, and local government was rudimentary or nonexistent. Reflecting the very individual needs of their the communities these colonial institutes—such as the *Tyalgum Literary and Mechanics Institute* in Queensland (fig. 1)—were not the inspiration of idealistic, intellectual reformers or of a fearful, middle, or industrialist class intent on instilling middle-class values in the expanding numbers of industrial workers; they were the response of colonists motivated by a desire to provide what we might today call "community empowerment," and a quest to build, in the lexicon of the twenty-first century, "social capital" for the benefit of all.

In the twenty-first century, the approaches to meeting changing community needs, perceived as innovative methods by some of the newest urban library services, have much in common with the activities and solutions devised by previous generations and their communities. These solutions suggest a move away from standardized practices and administrative arrangements for a generic set of common and tangible problems to

Figure 1. *Tyalgum Literary and Mechanics Institute* (1908). Reproduced with the permission of the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

approaches that examine and address the nature and needs of individual libraries and their communities. Once again libraries are becoming of and for the community.

Today's responses to societal change reflect, or even directly imitate, many activities pursued by earlier generations of community libraries such as mechanics' institutes and atheneums—for example, the introduction of nonstandard classification schemes, the expansion beyond traditional library services to include programs to enhance recreational and educational pursuits, the integration of multiple community services, and provision of a variety of community learning, creative, and recreational activities within or adjacent to the library spaces. Robert Knight (2002) pointed out that in rural situations a library is "often the one stable agent that remains in a community . . . [as a] natural meeting place for people [and] a de facto service provider for technology access, community information, learning support, council business, and much more" (pp. 273–74). According to Knight, the rural libraries are "part of an established network . . . public places freely accessible to all the community . . . reside in existing infrastructure . . . high valued and well patronised . . . part of a broader organization, being financially supported by their local councils and communities . . . community focal points . . . demonstrate co-operation between different levels of government [i.e. state and local govern-

ment] . . . are multi-focused service providers with an expanding brief to adopt broader roles" (pp. 274–75). This expanding brief now moves beyond providing services for depleted rural communities in the early part of the twenty-first century to catering for burgeoning urban populations as the century progresses.

In contemporary Australia the drive to reconceptualize public library services to enable them to cater to the diverse needs of the twenty-first century has presented opportunities for librarians to challenge conventional twentieth-century wisdoms and current practice. In particular, opportunities to rethink libraries both as places and spaces have occurred as a result of the rapid growth in population in the developing inner-city areas of cities such as Melbourne, Australia, and the concomitant need to offer new community services. For a number of years, Melbourne has been the fastest growing urban population in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013), and new library services are swiftly being provided (or redeveloped) in an effort to keep up with the growth of city dwellers. New residential hubs developing in previous industrial, riverside, and maritime areas have resulted in the opening or planning of a number of new community-focused public libraries. The development of these libraries has incorporated the reinclusion of many of the practices that underpinned library services in the first half of the twentieth century. The effect has been a move toward building design, collection organization, and community activities created to meet the individual needs of the particular community in which the library is located. In this way these new public libraries are driven by the same forces and aspirations of the earliest community libraries in the Australian colonies, and elsewhere.

One example of the re-emerging community library is a new library and community center—a "community hub"—located in the reclaimed riverbank area of central Melbourne as part of the City of Melbourne's strategy for community infrastructure provision. The City of Melbourne's *Community Infrastructure Plan 2007–17* (2007) proposed that hubs be developed in response to population growth and consequent needs and that each neighbourhood should have a "District Lifelong Learning Hub" that would provide "access to library services, informal open space, community office space, civic functions, lifelong learning opportunities, meeting spaces and computer use."

The Southbank Library at Boyd is a branch library of an extensive and growing library service focused on the flourishing inner-city high-rise areas of Melbourne and the needs of the communities in such growth areas (Melbourne Library Service, n.d.). Focused very much on its particular local community, the Boyd library is located in a building that was formally home to a government public school and subsequent domestic college, named after its patron who bequeathed a large sum of money to establish a school of domestic science so "that women should be taught

to manage a home correctly" (J. H. Boyd Girls High School, n.d.). The repurposed building, housing the library and other community facilities to form a "community hub," dates from 1884 and is considered one of the most ornamental and distinctive of the Education Department of Victoria's nineteenth-century schools. Representative of the obligation to provide free, secular, and compulsory education to all, in accordance with the 1872 Education Act in the Colony of Victoria, the original building was a statement of the colony's commitment to educate the community and its ambitions to cater for a future of growth and prosperity fuelled by post–gold-rush wealth. Today, the previous life of the building creates a pleasant synergy between the past and present in its aim to provide opportunities and services for the citizens of Melbourne's Southbank area through access to knowledge and education, both then and now. In the way of many earlier community institutes, the library site incorporates not just the library but also customer service access points, spaces for education and information, offices, meeting and artists' spaces, family and children's services, and multipurpose community spaces. The Melbourne Library Service *Strategic Plan 2008–2013* (2008) states that "libraries are not only physical facilities and places to borrow material. They are community hubs and places where people can meet for recreation, information and to foster a love of lifelong learning."

"Community hubs," of which this Melbourne facility is an example, are part of a much larger conversation taking place, both nationally and internationally, about the future of libraries, their place in the community, and the role they will play. Discussion of the twenty-first century public library uses a modern lexicon of terms such as "urban resiliency," "social inclusion and equity," "sustainable communities," "convergence," and "placemaking" (Dudley, 2013). The vision at the center of this discussion is focused firmly on establishing the public library as an agile and responsive third place (or space), beyond school and work, central to the education and well-being of the local community. Architectural historian Philip Goad, in the *Encyclopaedia of Australian Architecture* entry on "Public Libraries," draws our attention to the ongoing relevance of the public library in the Australian community. He writes of the public library as being "a vital civic focus to local communities, combining complementary functions in addition to the sharing of knowledge, both old and new" (Goad, 2012, p. 411). He also suggests that contemporary ideas are perhaps not just looking forward but also harking back to previous generations. He writes that "today, remarkably, despite the onset of digital technology, new libraries continue to be built across rural and suburban Australia. There is also a frequent echo of earlier times, when mechanics' institutes combined multiple functions with the pragmatic aim of providing education, entertainment and community gatherings under one roof" (p. 410).

Beyond what Goad calls an "echo of earlier times" and his own aware-

ness of the role of mechanics' institutes in nineteenth century communities, what seems to be missing from the conversation, in Australia at least, is any real appreciation of the antecedents of the contemporary Australian public library. Nor are the visions and concerns of previous generations of communities and their responses to such concerns part of the ongoing conversation. This absence of a historical perspective means that many view the current period as a time of revolution and a break with the past. It can be argued, however, that what is occurring is not a revolution but a contemporary redefining of the scope and function of the Australian public library and that this reconstruction of the virtual and physical space brings the library closer to its nineteenth-century roots in the Australian community. The links with the past are perhaps obscured by our changing vocabulary, in which terms such as "worldly intercourse," "common object," "self improvement," "rational amusement," and "diffusion of useful knowledge," as used by mechanics" institutes and similar institutions (Candy & Laurent, 1994), are no longer recognized or used, replaced by "access and equity," "general identity," "bridging the digital divide," "recreation centres," "lifelong education services" (City of Melbourne, 2011). Yet if we can discern the nuance of the language used to describe the functions of community libraries, the terminologies of the past and present have much in common. Faintly through contemporary conversations, for those willing to listen, there can be heard echoes of the voices, debates, and passions that drove the establishment of some of Melbourne's oldest and most venerable public institutions.

One such institution is the Melbourne Athenaeum and Library, named the Melbourne Mechanic's Institute when founded in 1839 by early European settlers in the Australian colonies. The colonists brought with them knowledge of libraries and, in particular, of mechanics' institutes. The antecedents of Australian mechanics' institutes are usually considered to be the Edinburgh School of Arts founded in 1821 or the Glasgow or London Mechanics' Institutes established in 1823. Only six years after Edinburgh, the first institute to be established in Australia was founded in Hobart as the Van Diemen's Land Mechanics' Institution in 1827. Variously named mechanics' institutes, schools of arts, and atheneums, two-thousand have been identified as being in existence by 1900 (Candy & Laurent, 1994, p. 2). Although established with the knowledge of institutes in the U.K., Australian mechanics' institutes were different. The new settlers wanted a more widely educated and classless society in the colonies and, besides this, Australia was an agricultural rather than mechanized society. Each new town established—alongside the hotels, churches, and one-teacher schools—an institute to suit their own community needs that included activities such as educational classes; museums; galleries; libraries; theatres; orchestral, voice, and theatre groups; boxing matches; weddings; and funerals. The events on offer often depended on the building occupied

by the mechanics' institute in any community and the space available. Over time, as prosperity grew, the institutes became bigger and more impressive, moving from the earliest "chapel cheapies," weatherboard one-room buildings; to "colonial classic," two- or three-roomed buildings with a more formal façade; to "gold rush glorious," impressive, multistoried monuments to wealth and prestige following the discovery of gold in Victoria in 1851. They did, however, broadly share a common aim such as (to quote from the Rules of the Launceston Mechanics' Institute, 1844), "the instruction of the members in the principles of the arts; the diffusion of scientific, literary, and other useful knowledge; and the rational amusement of the members, and cultivation of their tastes" (in Candy & Laurent, 1994, p. 7).

The Melbourne Mechanics' Institute and School of Arts was the first in Victoria, established just four years after European settlement (fig. 2). It was the first public building in the town and demonstrated its "Australian-ness" by providing "common ground between the church and the pub" (Baragwanath, 2011). The first meeting of the Institute was held in November 1839. Fees, committee membership, and officers of the Institute were established; works to be excluded determined ("polemical divinity or other matter [deemed] objectionable"); and the "laws for the government of the Institution" drafted (Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, 1839, November 12). The early Institute committees represented a "who's who" of early Melbourne society, and the institute itself well represents the Australian variety of mechanics' institutes in terms of its aims and objectives, collection, and activities. The first Code of Laws gives the primary object of the Institute as being "the diffusion of Scientific and Other Useful Knowledge among its members and the community generally" (Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, 1840). This was to be achieved through education for mechanics, evening classes, a lending library and reading room, and lectures. In the case of Melbourne, as elsewhere in the colonies, the lecture topics were determined, and limited, by who was available to give them and their particular areas of interest or expertise, for example, "Agriculture," "Temperance and Temperance Societies," "Animal Magnetism," "Wit and Humour," "Ninevah," "Physiology and Digestion," and "Dreams, Somnabulism and Insanity" (Eastwood, 1994).

Institute libraries and reading rooms were often the most successful and important aspect of institute functions, providing access to books, newspapers, and journals from the other colonies and Britain. Although the contribution by institutes to the provision of "useful knowledge," in terms of lectures and classes, can be debated (as it also is in the United Kingdom), there is little doubt that the Melbourne Institute and colonial mechanics' institutes generally were important and often central to the social, cultural, and educational development of nineteenth-century colonial societies.

Figure 2. *Mechanics' Institution, Melbourne* (1862). Engraving by Arthur Willmore. Reproduced with the permission of the State Library of Victoria.

Another theme recurring across centuries is the provision of access to collections for the public and how their arrangement might best meet the needs of its community. The website of the Southbank library in Melbourne's inner city asserts that the library "has a reader-friendly layout, similar to that of a book shop, making it much easier for you to find your next great read. Rather than being organized by Dewey, the nonfiction is arranged by a unique subject-based system with books clustered by popular topics such as Home and Lifestyle, Food and Drink, Arts and Culture and Travel" (Melbourne Library Service, n.d.).

The organization of the collection within this "new" community hub is surprisingly reminiscent of the arrangements of a much early collections in Melbourne: no Dewey Decimal Classification system, but rather a genre-based arrangement (called "genrefication" in the modern parlance). Take this description of a circulating library in Melbourne during the 1930s Depression from George Johnston's famous Australian coming-of-age novel *My Brother Jack* (1964, p. 170). Johnston writes:

> One Spring evening when I was on my way home I stopped to look at the books on display in the windows of Perce Parkinson's library which stayed open until nine-thirty so that subscribers could come down after

their supper and select their reading at leisure. The two side walls were shelved from floor to ceiling and subdivided into sections marked off with printed cards—ROMANCE, ADVENTURE, WILD WEST, DETECTIVE, GENERAL, TRAVEL, JUVENILE, NON-FICTION ("ROMANCE" occupied by far the largest space). . . . At the rear of the shop, between high arrow shelves respectively marked NEW ISSUES and AUSTRALIAN, a curtained doorway presumably led to some private apartment.

Earlier libraries, such as those of the institutes and colonial public libraries, before the introduction of Dewey in the early twentieth century, also bring to mind the "reader-friendly" layout of the new Melbourne library. The 1856 *Catalogue of the library of the Mechanics Institution* gives the subject groupings of the day as including history and historical memoirs, music, mechanics, mathematical science, architecture, engineering, works of fiction and, of course, useful arts. As the Colony of Victoria's national library, the Melbourne Public Library was intended to be more than a mechanics' institute, but its foundation collection was also arranged, in alcoves, by subjects under the labels botany and agriculture, voyages and travels, fine art and architecture, archaeology, heraldry and numismatics, biography, oriental and colonial history, and of course British prose and poetry. Medicine was shelved on the balcony to discourage ready access by all and sundry.

Philip Candy and John Laurent wrote, in their seminal work on Australia mechanics' institutes, that they were "the forerunners of today's community centres, adult education classes, technical colleges and local libraries, all rolled into one" (1994, p. 2). Mechanics' institutes were the first adult education providers, the first libraries, providing nonfiction, fiction, journals and newspapers in their public reading rooms, the creators of local cultural and intellectual climates, the focus and venue for social and community activities and events, and a representation of each local community. Just twenty years after Candy and Laurent's description of mechanics' institutes as organizations uniting many community amenities that subsequently functioned separately in the twentieth century, we see a return to the "all in one approach" in the modern "community hubs."

In 2013 the State Library of Victoria (SLV) and Public Libraries Victoria Network (PLVN) released a report detailing a vision for the public library of the future. This report, framed in terms of needs and wants and aspirations, and aimed at anticipating the shape of the public library in 2030, states that

- the aspirational vision of the Creative Library is to become the community's central hub for creative development and expression; and
- the mission of the Creative Library is to contribute to community wellbeing by facilitating creative development and expression in a collaborative environment (p. 7).

Table 1: Meeting community needs and wants in 2030

Community wants and needs emerging from future social trends	Opportunities for public libraries
A drive to explore and develop creative interests	Become vibrant creativity hubs, facilitating communal creative development and expression
Opportunities to partner and share with others, both as individuals and as organizations	Become coworking hubs, bringing people and organizations together to collaborate creatively, socially, and professionally
Lifelong mental engagement, stimulation and care	Become the community's brain gymnasium
Continuous acquisition of new knowledge and skills to participate fully in a rapidly changing environment	Provide community learning programs that support twenty-first-century literacies
Stable and trusted relationships with people and places of common interest	Become the community agora—a meeting place for people to gather, share and learn

This visualization of the twenty-first century community library is for it to become the "community agora—a meeting place for people to gather, share and learn" (p. 8). The mission of the community library is to support twenty-first century literacies by facilitating dynamic learning and community connection. A summary of how the State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network see libraries addressing "community needs and wants in 2030" (p. 8), almost twenty years from now, also suggests the direct link between the role of public library in serving its community in the future and that of over a century and a half ago (see table 1).

The library at Melbourne's Southbank has a similar, if narrower and more pragmatic, objective toward "community strengthening." That is, "Preserving the original heritage character of the building, the design has improved its sustainability and created new spaces to accommodate a range of community services and exciting new possibilities for the Southbank community. At Boyd you will not only find Southbank Library, but also Artist studios, Maternal and Child Health Services, Meeting rooms, outdoor spaces, a café and more" (Melbourne Library Service, 2013).

Aspiring to become a community agora by converging with creative, educational, and cultural spaces does not seem to remove the contem-

porary public library too far from the objectives of the early mechanics' institutes as previously discussed. The language may have altered, but the Melbourne Athenaeum's specific purpose to be for the "diffusion of useful knowledge both literary and scientific and for the educative benefit of the community generally" (Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, 1840) does not seem too remote from the SLV/PLVN's objectives for the public library to "become the community's brain gymnasium," or to "provide community learning programs that support 21st-century literacies," or even to facilitate "communal creative development and expression" (State Library of Victoria & Public Libraries Victoria Network, 2013).

When we look further at the foundational and continuing aspirations of institutions such as the State Library of Victoria, founded in 1854 as the Melbourne Public Library, we find the same themes reappearing. Melbourne in the nineteenth century was a complex mix of new world egalitarianism and old world conservatism, with a wide and influential vein of radicalism running through its development. Examples of this, such as the 1856 approval of the eight-hour working day for the building trades in Victoria, demonstrate the influences at work in this young colony, spurred on as it was by a utopian vision for a new society. The public library in its form, function, and operation owes much to this complex mix. Redmond Barry, an Anglo-Irish younger son of the Protestant Ascendancy, judge, womanizer, and visionary, was the driving force behind the establishment of the Melbourne Public Library in 1854 (and also an early committee member of the Mechanics' Institute). The library was to be the national library for the colony but also a public library for the citizens of Melbourne, similar to the public libraries established in Britain following the passing of the Public Libraries Act of 1850. Barry articulated his vision for the library as a hope that it would be "at least the second best in the world" after the British Museum, hold "the best of everything," and become "a great emporium of learning" (Roberts, 2003, p. 18). It was to be not just a treasure house but a free, democratic, and open library—a publically funded people's library open to men and women of all classes over the age of fourteen. It was imagined as a place of self-improvement and social unity, providing for everyone a collection of books that would be beyond the reach of any one person.

Joseph Reed's design for the new library with its portico, based on the elevation of a classical temple was, according to architectural historian Harriet Edquist, intended to reference it not only as a storehouse but as a place of the people (personal communication, May 31, 2013), an architectural device nuanced to suit the society in which it sat. Significantly, Reed also employed the use of a portico to mediate between street and interior in a number of subsequent public buildings including the Victorian Trades Hall and Literary Institute and the Melbourne Town Hall.

The endeavor of nineteenth-century librarians to provide education

for the community was an ongoing theme in the history of the Melbourne Public Library, with subsequent generations of librarians seeking to ensure that the library was a "living centre of learning" (Miller, 1912, p. 79). The library site was to be a place of informal and formal learning and by 1870, when the portico was added to the building, the location housed not only the library but also the National Gallery and the Industrial and Technological Museum. Courses in chemistry, metallurgy, geology, physiology, astronomy, and telegraphy were conducted on the site, lectures given, and exhibitions held. Such aspirations and convergence would seem to have much in common with the State Library of Victoria's twenty-first century vision "[to] be a place where all Victorians can discover, learn, create and connect. We want to be a cultural and heritage destination for Victorians, and a catalyst for generating new knowledge and ideas. The State Library will make a major contribution to the continuing development of a knowledge- and creativity-based economy for Victoria, and a socially and culturally rich society" (State Library of Victoria, 2013). Although the gallery and museum have moved to other locations in Melbourne, the library continues to maintain gallery and display spaces and includes a theatre, meeting and lecture rooms, a bookshop, and restaurant.

In aspiring to remain relevant and meet the many challenges of the twenty-first century, the contemporary public library has often sought to reconstruct a place for itself in its community and to embrace solutions that serve to bring it closer to the needs of this community. In seeking these solutions through engagement and responsiveness to the communities in which they reside, today's public libraries are inextricably connected with the past through a "golden thread of values and practices" (Gorman, 2003, p. 3). If, as Gorman also suggests, libraries are both "symbols" of a society's commitment to learning and a "manifestation" of a community's aspirations (p. 5), then the ambitions and vision for these spaces—past and present—have much in common, and contemporary librarians would do well to engage in a conversation with the past and explore the "golden thread" that binds them to it.

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