*The Australian public library as community place: a journey back to the future*

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# This paper has its genesis in to the opening of a new public library at Southbank in central Melbourne, and in the development of a number of ground-breaking library buildings around Victoria, all offering what are promoted as innovative facilities and services. These include performance spaces, games rooms, maker spaces and educational facilities. Reflecting on these developments and the approach taken in a recent report on Vocational education for the NCVER by Francesca Beddie (2014, 15) raised a number of questions about historical knowledge and its relevance to contemporary practice.

# Beddie’s report, somewhat unusually, took an historical approach to examining future needs in vocational education based on aview that you ‘can use history as a policy tool for uncovering trends, explaining institutional cultures and preventing the re-application of ideas already tested’ (2014, 4). This is a view which could be applied to Australian librarianship where there appears to be a general lack of historical perspective in the contemporary discussion of the claimed innovations in public libraries, both by those who are developing or managing the new services and by the media. Beddie’s view and the perceived lack of attention to history raises questions, including whether or not the application of a historical perspective to twenty-first century library development would contribute positively to contemporary practice, policy and outcomes? Using the development of Australian community and public libraries as case studies 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 a return to nineteenth-century foundations, and that examination of these precedents can make a contribution to contemporary practices.

It is evident that the new twenty-first century libraries, in their design, objectives, collections and programmes, are aiming to (and do) provide exciting opportunities and places for their local communities. The development of policy and practices which engage the community through activities, facilities and experiences such as gaming, lectures, classes on many and varied topics, art displays and musical performance, to name a few, all illustrate the contemporary public library’s attempt to transform themselves into community hubs through civic engagement. What is less evident to those who immerse themselves in the history of library development, both in Australia and elsewhere, is the extent of innovation when placed in the historical context. Public libraries, and their antecedents, having been deeply engaged with, and central to, the social, recreational and educational agendas of their local community over many decades. The contemporary re-conceptualising of the public library focussing on the centrality of community in their physical and

theoretical construction and the re-emergence of practices which mirror those of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can perhaps be best viewed as a journey ‘there and back again’.  The start of this journey for us was a visit to the Southbank Library at Boyd Community Hub in Melbourne.

For a number of years Melbourne has been growing and new library services are rapidly being provided (or redeveloped) in an effort to keep up with the growth in population. The Southbank Library at Boyd, as a branch of Melbourne Library Service, is part of a dynamic and emerging new library provision focused on the burgeoning inner city high-rise areas of Melbourne and the needs of the communities in such growth areas. This service also includes its most recent addition The Library at the Dock in Melbourne’s Docklands, which also captures the emerging vision for twenty-first century public libraries in many ways. This newest library is described as being a ’community hub enabling people to come together to create, explore, connect, belong, learn and participate’; and as having ’in addition to the traditional library collection … a recording studio, creative editing suites, community spaces and a  performance venue … [and] a gallery and exhibition space’ (Melbourne Library Service 2014A).

The Boyd library is also focussed very much on the local community though, unlike the purpose-built Library at the Dock, it is located in a building which was formally home to the J. H. Boyd Domestic College. The college was named after its patron, a successful grazier, 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’ (Heritage Victoria). The re-purposed building housing the Southbank Library dates from 1884 and is considered one of the most ornamental and distinctive of the Education Department of Victoria’s schools of the 19th century and a fine example of commitment to the provision of free, secular and compulsory education to all in the Colony of Victoria. This previous life for the building creates a pleasant synergy between the past and present in its vision for a better community. The Southbank site now incorporates not just the library but lifelong education services, community customer service and information points, offices, meeting and artists’ spaces, family and children’s services, multi-purpose community spaces. The City of Melbourne in its vision for the library service states that is believes ’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’ (Melbourne Library Service 2008).

Such ‘community hubs’, of which Southbank library and The Library at the Dock are examples, 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. The vision at the centre of contemporary discussion about the future of public libraries focuses firmly on establishing the public library as an agile and responsive 3rd place central to the education and wellbeing of the local community. Architectural historian Philip Goad in the *Encyclopaedia of Australian Architecture’s* entry on ‘Public Libraries’ draws our attention to the ongoing relevance of the public library in the Australian community. He writes of it as ‘a vital civic focus to local communities, combining complementary functions in addition to the sharing of knowledge, both old and new’ (Goad & Willis 2012, 411) but suggests that contemporary ideas are perhaps not just looking forward but also harking back to a previous generation of libraries. He writes

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 (Goad & Willis 2012, 410).

Despite Goad’s reference to the ‘echo of earlier times’ what seems to be missing from the conversation today is any real consideration of the antecedents of the contemporary Australian public library, a sense of the historical place of libraries in the community and the forces and vision which drove their original development, or the strategies adopted by previous generations to achieve this vision, so similar to the vision for today’s public libraries. The links with the past may perhaps be obscured by our changing vocabulary, in which terms such as ‘citizenship’, ‘rational amusement’ and ‘diffusion of knowledge’ are no longer recognized or used, replaced by a modern lexicon of terms such as ’urban resiliency‘, ‘social inclusion and equity’, ’sustainable communities‘, ’convergence‘ and ‘placemaking’. Yet faintly through the contemporary conversations, for those willing to listen, can be heard the voices, debates and passions which drove the establishment of some of Melbourne’s oldest and most venerable public institutions.

 One such institution is the Melbourne Athenaeum and Library, originally the Melbourne Mechanic’s Institute. Early European settlers to the Australian colonies brought with them knowledge of libraries and in particular, 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 - the Van Diemen’s Land Mechanics’ Institution founded in 1827. Variously named mechanics’ institutes, schools of arts or athenaeums, 2000 have been identified as being in existence in Australia by 1900. Although established with the knowledge of institutes in the United Kingdom, Australian mechanics’ institutes were different. The new settlers wanted a better educated and more egalitarian society in the colonies and Australia was not a mechanised society. Each new town established, alongside the hotels, churches and one-teacher schools, an institute to suit their own needs which might include: classes, museums, galleries, theatres, orchestral, voice and theatre groups, boxing matches, weddings, funerals … anything. They did however broadly share a common aim such as this one 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’ (Candy & Laurent 1994, 7). In Victoria, described by historian Geoffrey Blainey as ’the best colony for the reader‘ in the late 1880s, with twice as many books as in New South Wales (Blainey in Baragwanath 2011), one institute a month opened in the years immediately after the discovery of gold in 1851 to a total of 1100 being established. The Melbourne Mechanics Institute was the first in Victoria and was established in 1839 just four years after European settlement. It was the first public building in the town and provided ’common ground between the church and the pub’ (Baragwanath 2011).

Melbourne was officially established in 1837 and had a population of just 1800 in 1838 yet the first meeting of the Melbourne Mechanics’ Institute was held in 1839 (although originally scheduled to be held on November 5 the meeting had to be rescheduled when most people chose to attend the Guy Fawkes bonfire instead). The early institute committees represent a “who’s who” of early Melbourne society and the institute itself well represents the Australian variety of mechanics’ institutes. 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’ (Candy & Laurent 1994, 66). This was to be achieved through lectures, education for mechanics, evening classes and a lending library and reading room. In the case of Melbourne, as elsewhere in the colonies, the lecture topics and standard were determined by who was available and their particular areas of interest or expertise. Early lecture topics included ‘Agriculture’, ‘Temperance and Temperance Societies’, ‘Animal Magnetism’, ‘Wit and Humour’, ‘Ninevah’, ‘Physiology and Digestion’ and ‘Dreams, Somnambulism and Insanity’.

A perusal of the activities on offer at the contemporary Melbourne Library Service’s branch libraries indicates a modern range of activities with a surprising affinity with those provided by nineteenth-century mechanics’ institutes: lectures, crafting groups, reading circles, games day, children’s activities, writing workshops, support groups.

Institute libraries and reading rooms, providing access to books and newspapers and journals from the other colonies and Britain, were in many cases the most successful and important aspect of institute functions and these often, over time, became the sole function. Although the success of providing “useful knowledge” in terms of lectures and classes can be debated, and Australian institutes were quite different to those in England and Scotland, there is little doubt that the Melbourne Institute, and colonial mechanics’ institutes generally, were important in the social, cultural and educational development of nineteenth-century colonial societies presenting a kind of template for similar twenty-first century aspirations.

Philip Candy, in his seminal work on Australia mechanics’ institutes, wrote that they were ’the forerunners of today’s community centres, adult education classes, technical colleges and local libraries, all rolled into one’ (Candy & Laurent 1994, 2). Mechanics’ institutes were the first adult education providers; the first libraries, providing non-fiction, 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 since Candy’s reference to discrete and siloed community and cultural facilities having superseded the all-encompassing mechanics’ institutes in the latter half of the 20th century we see a return to the “all in one approach” to community amenities in the modern “community hubs”.

The aspirational vision for these new hubs is well explicated by a report published in June 2013 by Public Libraries Victoria Network and the State Library of Victoria detailing the 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 new and ‘creative’ 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 (State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria 2013, 7)

This future version of the public library is to re-invent itself as the ‘community agora – the people’s place’ to meet the needs of a changing community. The opportunities for public libraries in this new community are outlined in Table 1 (State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network 2013, 8). These aspirations and opportunities are clearly echoing those of early mechanics institutes to provide a place and space for community learning, recreation and education.

**Table 1: Meeting Community needs and wants in 2030**

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| **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 organisations  | Become co-working hubs, bringing people and organisations 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 21st-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 |

At the Boyd library, Southbank, smaller and more pragmatic aspirations also demonstrate this return to a previous focus on central community facilities: ‘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 2014B).

These aspirations, both large and small, for the contemporary pubic library do not seem too far removed from the objectives of mechanics’ institutes aspiring as they did to provide instruction, disperse knowledge, provide amusement and cultivate taste. Looking further at institutions such as the State Library of Victoria (formally the Melbourne Public Library) and it foundational and continuing aspirations we also find that these themes re-appear over generations and past, present and future aspirations pivot on the library as community space.

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 such as the 1856 approval of the 8 hour working day for the building trades mark 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 also owes much to this complex mix. Redmond Barry, Anglo-Irish younger son of the protestant ascendancy, judge, womaniser and visionary, was the driving force behind the establishment of the Melbourne Public Library in 1853. He articulated his vision for that institution as a hope that it would be ‘at least the second best in the world to the British Museum and contain the best of everything and become a great emporium of learning, and philosophy, of literature, science and art’ (Roberts 2003, 18). Yet this was not to be 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 14. It was imagined as a place of self improvement and social unity, one in which was ’placed within the reach of the humblest citizen a library which the richest could not afford to purchase’ (The Age 1856, 11). Joseph Reed’s design for the new library, with its portico based on the elevation of a classical temple was, as explained by architectural historian Harriet Edquist in a recent presentation, intended to reference it not only as a treasure house but as a place of the people, an architectural device nuanced to suit the society in which it sat. Reed was significantly to employ the use of the 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 library’s nineteenth century endeavours 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 the library was a ‘living centre of learning’ (Miller 1912, 79) free and open to all. The Melbourne Public Library was to be a place of informal and formal learning and to this end, by 1870, the site 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 nineteenth-century convergence and aspirations would seem to have much in common with the library’s 21st vision as the State Library of Victoria

to be a place where all Victorians can discover, learn, create and connect... to be a cultural and heritage destination for Victorians, and a catalyst for generating new knowledge and ideas [and to] 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 2014)

Further convergence between old and new is evidenced by the provision of access to library collections to best meet the needs of the community. The Boyd library at Southbank website (Melbourne Library Service 2014B) states

The Southbank Library at Boyd 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 organised by Dewey, the non-fiction 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

The “new” arrangement of the collection within this community hub is surprisingly reminiscent of the organisation of a much early collections in Melbourne, organised by genre rather than the Dewey Decimal Classification system. Earlier libraries such as those of the institutes and the colonial public libraries, before the introduction of Dewey in the early 20th century, bring to mind the “reader-friendly” layout of Boyd. The 1856 Catalogue of the Library of the Mechanics Institution (Melbourne Mechanics Institution 1856) gives the subject groupings of the day as including History and Historical Memoirs, Music, Mechanics, Mathematical Science, Architecture, Engineering and, of course, Useful Arts. The library also had available Works of Fiction, further broken down into genres such as the very popular Westerns and Romance during the 20th century. Similarly the Melbourne Public Library was organised by genre. As the Colony of Victoria’s national library the public library was intended to be more than a mechanics’ institute. It was not to contain anything ’to attract the idle and inquisitive or to entertain the frivolous‘ (Hubber 2004, 68) and the foundation collection was arranged in alcoves under the labels Botany and Agriculture, Voyages and Travels, Fine Art and Architecture, Archaeology, Heraldry and Numismatics, Biography, Oriental and Colonial History and British Prose and Poetry. Medicine was shelved on the balcony to discourage ready access by all and sundry. Although a critic of the collection in 1868 claimed that ‘the Library is full of the hot novels and pernicious trash which have deluged many of the provincial library in England’ (McVilly 1971, 81) the Melbourne Public Library in fact excluded popular novels, leaving them to the institute but purchasing the works of respectable novelists of the day such as Dickens, Scott, Kingsley and arranging them in the British Prose alcove.

The twenty-first century has presented many challenges for public libraries nationally and internationally, and they have sought to rise to these challenges by re-imagining their place in their communities and the way in which they deliver their services.  In aspiring to remain relevant and meet the many challenges of the twenty-first century the contemporary public library has often sought to re-construct a place for itself and to embrace solutions which serve to bring it closer to the needs of its 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, 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 (2003, 5) then the ambitions and vision for these spaces, both 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’ which binds them to it.

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