

PUBLIC PLACE, TECHNOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY LIBRARY

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Urban environments have become dominated by commercial interests and the retail pressure to purchase. They are characterised by placelessness, the disappearance of community and the domination of consumption. A remarkable exception to this is the rise of the contemporary public library. Its architecture can create a true sense of place and community. Most importantly, the library should express and embody precious community values and aspirations: openness, acceptance and equity.

Our contemporary cities are no longer articulated and figured through a sequence of public buildings, nor a series of public open spaces that represent our values and aspirations. They are dominated by the image of mammon; a skyline of commercial towers the occupancy of which vary with the flux and fortunes of the market.

The public identity of our cities has been eroded and private capital has come to dominate. Our public institutions have also transformed as they merge with these speculative office buildings that accommodate undifferentiated government offices and public services, while post offices merge with hotels and shopping centres and churches become nightclubs.

However these transformations are not to be bemoaned or looked back upon with nostalgia, as it is important to understand the nature of these changes and the corresponding new public spaces that are opening and expanding. This includes the less tangible but equally significant virtual public spaces of the internet and communications technology that interconnect us all, globally. These are new potentially equalising and equitable public platforms.

Take for example the Iranian post electoral protests against alleged electoral fraud that occurred in Tehran and other cities four years ago. The popular uprising and the violence used to suppress the protests were projected instantly around the globe. The shooting death of one of the protestors, Neda Agha-Soltan, was captured on amateur video in graphic detail by bystanders and broadcast over the internet, posted on Youtube and Facebook within hours, spreading virally around the world to become a global rallying point for the reformist opposition. The political force of these virtual public spaces was quickly realised and attempts made to close them off, Iranian authorities blocked websites, blocked mobile phone transmissions and text messages at the same time as the actual rallies were banned.

Much as in the early 19th century the great boulevards of Paris were bulldozed through the narrow streets under the direction of Georges-Eugene Haussmann to discourage political rioters, prevent the construction of barricades and ultimately to bring them to a speedy end through the provision of a clear line of fire for the cannon.

The new electronic spaces for protest that authorities are and will continue to attempt to control, we hope are far more resistant. However the signs are mixed, with authoritarian regimes finding ways to control and counter the political impact of the internet and filter content. Chinese internet censorship and the blocking of websites outside China, perhaps being only the most salient and least subtle. Equally undermining is the vast scale of online surveillance by western governments revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden.

But the omni present smartphone has become an extension of not only the world's media but an interconnected network of public space and communications. Every mobile phone is a window through which almost the entire world can see. The smartphone has become an extension of not only the world's investigative or prying media but an interconnected network of public space and communications.

This was illustrated at the G20 protests in London four years ago. Isolated violence by the police against protestors was recorded on video, including the baton blow from behind on a bystander Ian Tomlinson who subsequently died. Disturbing images of this police brutality were recorded by protestors and bystanders and first made available on YouTube and then the news services, to the acute embarrassment

of the authorities – leading to a review of policing tactics and training for public events, the criminal charging of the police officer involved and a civil settlement with the family of the dead man.

As powerful as the new form of communication and virtual global public space are in contemporary life, it is important to remember that these protests and events happened somewhere, in a physical public domain. In the streets and squares of Tehran, and outside the Bank of England in the streets of London. In the public places of the city the collective energy was concentrated in planned and spontaneous protest gatherings of the citizens. This physical interaction of public place and the direct action of citizens was most powerfully illustrated on a global scale with the Occupy movement of protest against social and economic inequality that occurred in 2011 and 2012 in over 95 cities.

However, beyond these extreme events the contemporary world is increasingly characterised by nonplace, pseudo public realms of consumption disguised as community and individual expression. It may be that the expanding horizon of our knowledge and extension of our possibilities through the electronic media make the world, in a sense, more accessible, more familiar, but at the same time, this extended territory is less and less meaningful. All the more often we experience a zone or space where we interface or intersect in some fleeting social simulation associated with purchase, rather than the experience of a place in which to simply be and meet. Airports, shopping malls, hotels and other transit zones are nonplaces, of consumption and mobility, encouraging thoughtless, constant action, and offering no moment nor place to stay.

Privatisation and the public domain

Driven by profit and development, these nonplaces are the insidious privatisation of the public domain. The shopping centre and airport are pseudo public places. How many protests have occurred in a shopping centre, a hotel lobby or an airport terminal? The only violence in the shopping centre is the crush of the sale, the rush to purchase what in fact can never be embodied in the product, can never be purchased; self acceptance, and contentment with our lives. They are alienating environments that feed the fabrication of needs and wants beyond what can be satisfied, in order to ensure we return for what we ultimately do not need and cannot afford.

The shift from sufficiency consumption to routine excess consumption is now almost complete. Our rate of consumption has almost doubled in the last ten years, according to Neal Lawson in his aptly named book *All consuming* published earlier this year. Lawson has termed our current condition ‘turbo-consumerism’.

He traces this dependence on consumption to the work of Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek in the 1930s who argued – perhaps understandably in an era of Nazism and Communism – that high social spending inevitably lead to oppression and tyranny of the citizen, as opposed to the more liberal and liberating path of private consumption. However I do not think Hayek and Von Mises envisioned the low tax, small state, free market domination that path has lead us down. Our identity is no longer so connected with where we are from, or what we do, or think, but with what we have, what we buy. Now, of course, consumption does induce a certain feeling of happiness, but it is momentary and shallow, like the passing flux of fashion itself.

The failing of architecture

Architecture has largely become complacent with and an integral element of this consumer culture, desperately seeking to be identified as current and cool, knowing all too well that the moment will soon pass. Architecture has in many ways been reduced to a consumer object and given the status and value of a brand primarily through the intense promotional efforts of its authors.

It is possible to imagine that the current period of architectural production may in the future be looked back upon with a certain disappointment, and seen as a reflection of a time of great affluence aptly represented in the formal self indulgence of its architects. A time where we were enamoured with new Cad tools and the formal ease they offered to overwork every opportunity into an 'architectural statement'

fed and in turn feeding the insecure individualism and consumer branding and which are ultimately as empty and unfulfilled as the absent social consciousness of such indulgent projects.

What we are left with is a city like Dubai where all these buildings and their authors are vying for attention and obsessed with their own self importance. There is no city, no community, there are no shared values; there is only the triumph and the catastrophe of individual expression – a socially bankrupt and profoundly empty place from which we desperately seeking relief in the form of intense consumption and the false promise it offers.

Consumption is now promoted as a solution for our deep seated emotional and spiritual needs through the ardency and artistry of the advertising industry. Once this is achieved there is no limit to our excessive consumption, irrespective of the consequential waste, as our emotional and spiritual needs are considerable. The actual satisfying of them through spending and consumption is fleeting and the depth of the void we are attempting to fill increases as each moment inevitably passes. We become consumer junkies – our life centred on artificial hits, unable to recognise the authentic. This consumer monoculture has driven out alternative ways for society to organise itself and profoundly undermined democracy. The shopping centres, airports hotels, and these nonplaces of consumption are the antithesis of public places for the life and action of citizens.

However within the contemporary dilution of the physical public realm and public institutions of cities there have been notable exceptions – primarily in the form of the community library

The contemporary community library

The growth of the public library is in some ways ironic, given the rise of information technology and the independent and individual access to information it offers that perhaps in some ways makes the library superfluous.

But while the rapid and almost overwhelming rise in information and communications technology has brought with it much promise and potential in terms of equity of access and democratic virtual spaces of exchange, it has also given us cause for concern through the control, coercion and censorship of these spaces and paradoxically the potential for social exclusion and isolation.

Access to information, communications technology and social media is still in many ways dependent on wealth and support. This, together with the associated constant and intense rate of change of this technology, breeds a constant sense of anxiety, a fear of exclusion, of being left behind and left out. This is a fear most likely to occur in the disadvantaged, the less affluent, the aged, the less educated, the less skilled, and in many ways also in the young who – while they possess a familiarity and aptitude for this media – also have the greatest sensitivity to social exclusion and need of acceptance.

The technology itself, while increasingly mobile brings the risk of social isolation as we fall deeply into virtual domains that insulate us from the difficult realities of our lives. The subtle manipulative character of much of this communications technology is also to be considered. Utilisation of the technology can actually be mind closing through its selective nature. Search engines such as google are selective, not open, and the commercial drive of taste management through online market places such as Amazon, ebay and itunes breeds the potential for counter diversity and closed minds.

It is within this technological and social context that the library has risen as the most important and meaningful public building of our young century.

The library itself has been transformed from a storehouse of the collection and quiet individual study into a true community meeting place. It is now made up of a diverse interlocking series of spaces for study, casual reading, interaction, collaboration, children's spaces, community spaces, language and IT support spaces, café environments, lounges and outdoor terraces and gardens. It is a place where guidance and assistance is offered without obligation, where we can meet by arrangement or informally bump into our neighbours or visitors from out of town. It is place where we can just be without having to buy. It is paradoxically the most

grounded and localised community environment that at the same time facilitates and supports global interconnection.

The library as place

More than any other contemporary building typology the contemporary library has become a 'place' within an urban environment dominated by nonplace and the fabrication of wants and needs. It has become a shared and socially inclusive place for the whole community, for children, young adults, students and the aged, that facilitates lifelong learning and social development. And its architecture should express and embody these most precious community values and aspirations: openness, acceptance and equity.

Integral to any antidote to anonymous commercialism is a focus on sustainable and local environments; places which are pleasant and healthy to inhabit over extended periods of time, that are transparent and welcoming to their communities and enhance our wellbeing.

The library as catalyst

Increasingly libraries are identified as catalysts for social and urban regeneration or foundations of local identity for new communities. Designs for new libraries critically address an urban response to their site, offering public places where frequently there are none. These spaces provide settings for a range of local activities, protection from the elements and a transition from the street to the interior. Louvred porticos have been integrated to offer shade and amenity to both gardens and glazing, which combined with other elements such as swales and indigenous planting, vastly improve outlook and site specific responses to sustainable landscaping.

Daylight filtered by fixed and automatic shading devices characterises the internal lounge and study areas. Their transparency to the outside ensures legibility and expression of purpose for the community. There is an emphasis on the creation of comfortable and flexible space. Air conditioned spaces are supplemented by a range of sustainable methods such as night purge, thermal labyrinths, biofiltration, chilled beam or floor displacement systems. The improved levels of fresh air and oxygen further assist in concentration and sense of wellbeing.

In the longer term, an integrated response to lighting, energy and water use, sustainable/high performance material selection, and inherent flexibility within the design, ensures that these buildings offer significant savings in running costs as well as the ability to adapt to an ever changing typology.

Recent fjmt community libraries: a discussion

Max Webber Library, Blacktown NSW

- the initial site boundaries were challenged by the new mall development which threatened to consume the site up to the council chambers
- within the design process, fjmt insisted that there should be sufficient public open space adjacent to the library
- transparent facades to two street frontages and an entry from the public open space ensure uninterrupted views into the building
- generous central void provides assistance in wayfinding and washes both floors with natural daylight
- colocated with a large, flexible meeting space which is subdivisible and supplemented by an elegant breakout area / atrium. This spaces, and the café below, are accessible out of library operating hours
- materiality is timeless and warm
- completed over five years ago, this library reflects the initial changes in typology with a stronger emphasis on meeting spaces and the importance of the public realm.

Hume Global Learning Centre and Library Craigieburn Victoria (HGLC)

- growth area and satellite suburb currently in early phases of development
- uses include library, learning centre (meeting/training spaces), childcare, university satellite office, and housing of mobile library

- challenge of designing in a physical context which was predominantly farmland earmarked to become a sports centre, school and the ubiquitous mall
- no existing urban character
- HGLC briefed to become the new community heart
- the library frontage creates the first public spaces in the area, with generous entry canopy, shaded outdoor settings and protection from the strong winds common in the northern Melbourne suburbs
- the internal foyer provides visual links to all uses, assisting in clear wayfinding and hinting at the activity beyond. As a single entry to all facilities, the foyer provides opportunity for greater connection and chance meetings
- a café is linked both to the foyer and entry. Its atmosphere is one which allows people to pass time without the pressure of work and home, surrounded by newspaper collections, sunny outlook and opportunity to watch people come and go
- in a community devoid of other venues, the library serves purposes far beyond its typology. 3000 visitors attended a job fair in one day, businessmen frequently book meeting rooms to work remotely or hold interviews, a rock band played a youth week gig in the children's area and photography club members regularly lounge within the books and roam around the building
- flexibility is ensured by column free space, shelves and joinery on wheels, floor displacement air conditioning and operable walls.
- the quality of the spaces inspires uses beyond the intended – visitors appreciate the amenity, quality and character of the spaces
- the views into the building, are in this case more critical than the views out, which remain characterised by unfinished development. The building illuminates its activities to the street inviting participation
- located at the epicentre of the library, creating a constant hive of activity, the public access computers are in constant demand, even at the quietest times. Perhaps reflecting the demographics in Craigieburn, laptop use is less common but evident in the collaborative workspaces and the social hub bench. The library provides IT support and digital literacy programs and the 'learning centre' offers fully integrated conferencing and distance learning capability. This wealth of digital literacy capital ensures democratic access to information and education
- libraries have become the physical and digital contemporary model of the original Greek Forum, where public squares were used as meeting space where ideas and views could be exchanged.

Melton Library and Learning Hub Melton Victoria

- its brief required the new building to be a civic heart and centre of learning. All parts of the building were to contribute to learning in the community
- facing into the loading dock of the local supermarket, surrounded by unremarkable commercial buildings, and addressing similar issues of population growth to Craigieburn, Melton Library and Learning Hub was obliged to create its own place and outlook
- building to the boundary would have confronted library visitors with a monotonous vista and the opportunity to provide new outdoor space for the residents of Melton would have been wasted. Instead, the building is set back with considered landscape architecture offering ample shaded areas for seating, festivity and play
- its presence on the street is distinctly different. The warmth of its timber frame and completely transparent facade is in marked contrast to its surrounds, boldly announcing that it is a public building and welcomes visitation
- public areas at ground floor lie within generous double height space with the longest frontage to the street, except at the entry where a community lounge hovers directly above – the lounge rather than the book takes priority
- on darker days and from dusk, much of the activity and atmosphere within the library is enticingly on show, displaying a range of settings and possibilities of use for anyone who cares to visit. Floating in the double height space above the community training café, flower like light works glow like dandelions in the sun creating an enchanting and poetic space for all manner of activity. 'Grow' by Warren Langley is

abstracted from the local eucalyptus blossom; each chandelier drawing less than 40w of power and made from recyclable high density polyethylene

- local identity extends beyond the public art to the graphics where old maps are routed into the plywood screens around the entry foyer
- there is an intensive program of lifelong learning, training and community support offering access to a university style seminar room, a satellite office for a major university, a broad range of meeting and training rooms all located within a warm, nonthreatening environment
- community support extends to integrated uses such as maternal and early childhood health which is located within the children's library space
- IT integration is seamless and far more flexible than predecessors, allowing spaces to be truly multi use. Wireless and floor access to IT points mean that spaces are less rigid and more comfortable to use
- Melton is the first public building to be awarded the 'as built' 5 star rating. Some of the initiatives include
 - laminated timber structure (low embodied energy and carbon capture)
 - precast wall panels without cement content
 - thermal break in glazing stopping heat transfer through glass fixings
 - 82% reduction in potable water use as compared to standard practice building
 - 92% recycling rate from the demolition of the previous buildings on the site
 - 43.7% reduction in total CO2 emissions related to the building use. These improvements have allowed the library to save \$29,800 a year in utility costs, with \$23,700 savings in gas and \$5000 in water, when compared with similar sized buildings that are not built to Green Star benchmarks
 - a 48,000 litre tank that collects rainwater for nonpotable uses including landscape irrigation and toilet flushing
 - high indoor air quality assisted by night purge flushing of hot air.

Library and Community Centre, Surry Hills NSW

- demonstrates the city of Sydney's commitment to environmentally sustainable development and has set a benchmark in sustainable design and hybrid community facilities
- located on Crown Street, which acts as the main street of this inner city suburb, the site is prominent but highly constrained in area. The site is constrained, measuring just 25 by 28 metres and bound on three edges by roads
- a key objective for the centre was to establish a new Australian standard of excellence for environmentally sustainable design in civic buildings. The building incorporates many sustainable design innovations and seeks to integrate these into the architecture and explore the expressive potential of such systems
- the demography is characterised by a diversity of age, income, cultural and professional backgrounds
- Crown Street has an existing dynamic street life characterised by exciting shop fronts and outdoor seating.
- the design philosophy evolved from principles established in a detailed community consultation process, which informed an understanding of the community needs and reinforced the environmentally sustainable program
- the design seeks to establish a contemporary sense of place (both building and open space) that will provide an open and inviting public (community) facility with strong connection to its setting. We have sought to create a certain monumentality, significance and dignity to this important public place (and the community values it embodies)
- the architecture is conceived with simple forms, each a response to the urban framework (proportion and scale) while symbiotic to the functional, pragmatic and environmental control requirements. While the architecture is inviting and transparent, it is also to a degree 'silent', such that it offers a contrasting environment to the 'noise' of its urban context
- the building has a number of innovative sustainable design initiatives
 - environmental atrium using bio filtration via specialised plants to clean the air
 - geothermal bores to passively cool building systems water

- thermal labyrinth to passively cool air
- rainwater reuse and storage
- photovoltaic array for onsite power generation
- solar tracking louvred facade to minimise heat gain
- green roof to insulate the building
- Summary of performance data to date
 - electrical consumption between 5-10% better than benchmark modelling
 - water consumption between 5-10% better than benchmark modelling
 - gas consumption 40% saving
 - CO2e emissions are 10% better than envisaged
 - CO2 improvement continues to be in the order of 5%
 - the thermal labyrinth is performing far in excess of the thermal modelling.

Learnings

- Within a technological and social context the library has risen as the most important and meaningful public building of our young century.
- The public library has become a ‘place’ within an urban environment dominated by nonplace and the fabrication of wants and needs – a shared and socially inclusive place whose architecture should express and embody the most precious community values and aspirations of openness, acceptance and equity.
- Increasingly libraries are identified as catalysts for social and urban regeneration or foundations of local identity for new communities.
- Libraries have become the physical and digital contemporary model of the original Greek Forum, where public squares were used as meeting space where ideas and views could be exchanged.

