

Public Libraries

Community Gateways in the Information Age

Penelope Layland reveals how public libraries have reinvented themselves as access points to the world of digitised knowledge—helped by initiatives such as the National Library’s Kinetica cataloguing system

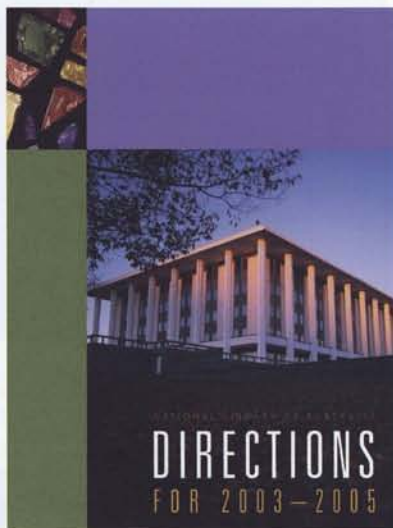
For thousands of Australians the local public library is now no longer just the place they go to in order to borrow books. It is also the place they go if they need to surf the Internet or send an email. For thousands more, the public library is the venue for community meetings. Others ‘visit’ their local library from the comfort of their own home computer—renewing a book online, checking the status of a reservation or exploring the catalogue. And for a growing number of Australians, the local suburban library is a gateway to something far bigger than what can be found on that particular library’s shelves—35 million items held in 1100 libraries across the nation.

We have come a long way from the days when the librarian behind the loans desk wielded a rubber date stamp and spent hours each day slotting cards into little envelopes glued inside the front covers of books. But the world of online catalogues, digitised magazines and virtual reference books is not so much a radical departure from tradition as a logical extension of tradition, a natural progression.

Digitisation has redefined our understanding of what our documentary heritage should look like. And the Internet has altered our perceptions of how geographically proximate an object has to be before we can legitimately hope to have access to it. Ever since Australia’s



(above) Replica of the Noosa ferry *Riverlight* at Noosa Library. The replica was built by a local builder and funded by the owner of the real *Riverlight* ferry. May 2001
Courtesy of Noosa Library



(left) Cover of the strategic document *National Library of Australia: Directions for 2003–2005*

public collecting institutions committed themselves to the philosophy of a distributed national collection, the physical location of an object has no longer been the single most important factor in determining who should have access to it. And, with 1510 public library service points throughout Australia, public libraries are positioned as a logical platform for delivery into local communities.

David Toll, Deputy Director-General of the National Library of Australia, believes that we are

experiencing the reinvention of the public library in Australian communities. Once regarded as primarily places for readers, public libraries have become community spaces and doorways to a wider world of information and knowledge.

Of course, this reinvention of the public library, while it has the hallmarks of an organic evolutionary process, is also being assisted through initiatives of the National Library of Australia. Consistent with several of the objectives outlined in its strategic document, *Directions for 2003–2005*, the National Library has supported and implemented a number of initiatives that have allowed public libraries to participate more easily in national schemes and that have helped them remain relevant in the information age.



For example, public library use of the National Library's monumental Kinetica cataloguing system (a Web-based system for interlibrary lending and document delivery) has grown considerably since the introduction of state-wide licensing. This allows consortia of public libraries to access Kinetica's 33.5 million-strong listings, including 6.8 million holdings of public libraries, at a lower cost than if they had had to sign up as individuals. Public libraries are now responsible for almost 100 000 searches a year on Kinetica—accounting for 10 per cent of all Kinetica traffic.

Not only that, public libraries can use Kinetica's Document Delivery Service. Their users can order copies of thousands of documents available at thousands of locations. An automated ordering and purchasing system keeps track of transactions, acting as a kind of electronic bookkeeper. The system works on a cost-recovery basis. Every two months each library receives an account, showing what they have borrowed on behalf of their customers, what they have lent to the customers of other libraries, and what they owe.

There are plans for a much more ambitious system that would give public libraries access to a far greater range of national services, including access to full-text digital journals, the Online Australian Resources database (which contains the latest statistics on a range of topics, including health and education) and the wonderful PictureAustralia service (which gives users access to more than 600 000 reproduction-quality images of

paintings, photographs and other visual objects held in over 20 collecting institutions, ranging from the Australian War Memorial to art galleries and general museums). A pilot program, offering a package of such services through a public libraries portal, will be conducted this year by the Brisbane City Council—a national leader in the provision of public-library services—Yarra Plenty, in outer suburban Melbourne, Yarra Melbourne Regional Library Corporation in the heart of Melbourne and Moree, in rural western NSW. The National Library, in collaboration with these libraries, is working on an interface that will be simple enough for library users to negotiate themselves. At the moment, most of the searching of Kinetica that goes on in our public libraries is still in the hands of librarians, rather than members of the public.

It is easy to imagine that, for libraries in relatively remote areas of the country, being able to offer their communities access to such world-class services as Kinetica and PictureAustralia is particularly significant, given their relative isolation from the big city collecting institutions. That makes the inclusion of the Moree public library in the portal project of particular interest to other rural and remote libraries.

Grant White, Regional Manager of the Northern Regional Library and Information Service in Moree, says that being able to access the resources of the National Library breaks down what have been very significant

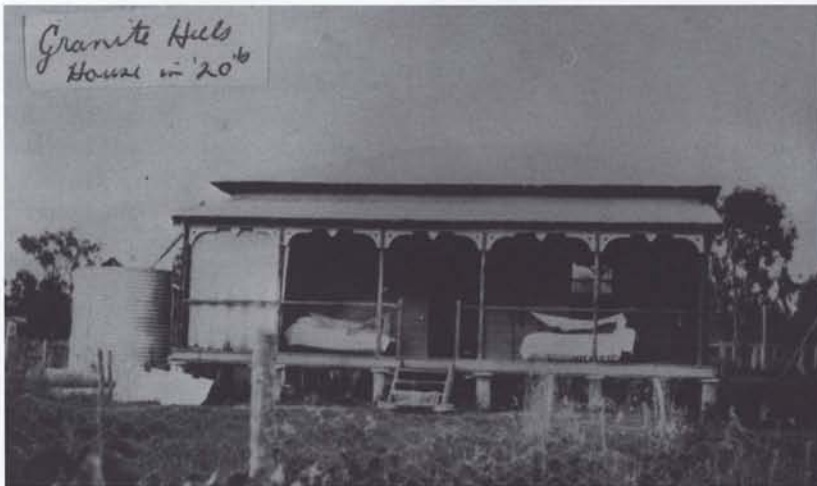
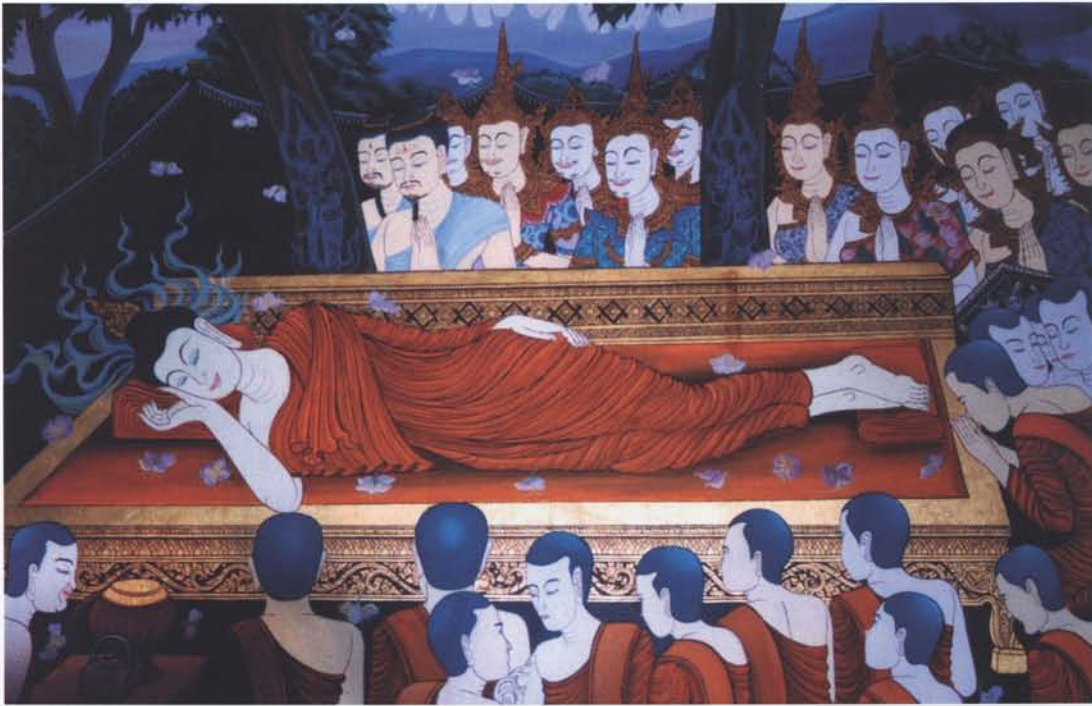
barriers for places such as Moree. He says working with the National Library is an important step in creating the opportunity for Australians everywhere to be able to access resources held across the nation. Naturally, the traffic is not just one-way. Public libraries themselves have much to offer such collaborative initiatives.

For example, five public libraries are already participating in PictureAustralia, contributing their own digitised images to the collection. The ACT Heritage Library has made more than 2000 digital images of early Canberra available through PictureAustralia. The Brisbane City Council Library has contributed more than 6000 images, dating back to the 1840s. The Campbelltown City Library has made available more than 6600 images of local historical significance. The Lake Macquarie City Library has contributed more than 4700 images, including many from the late nineteenth century, while the Thuringowa City Library has made available more than 1000 images,

(above) 'Youth Space' at Ipswich Library. An area where local schools are encouraged to display their art work
Courtesy of Ipswich Library

(below) Mill Park Library, Mill Park Victoria, owned by the City of Whittlesea and operated by Yarra Plenty Regional Library
Courtesy of Yarra Plenty Regional Library





(top) The Campbelltown City Library has recently made available through PictureAustralia more than 6600 images of local historical significance, such as this detail of a mural:

Stan Brabender
*Detail of mural inside Wat Pa
 Buddharangsee*
 39 Junction Road, Leumeah, 1999
 File no. 006\006696
 Campbelltown City Library

(below) The Thuringowa City Library has recently made available through PictureAustralia more than 1000 images, including many of the region's longest established families:

Kelso family's Granite Hills house at
 Laudham Park, c.1920s
 Kelso Collection, Image no. 0000067
 Thuringowa City Library

including many of the region's longest established families.

And more than ever before, public libraries are assertively marketing themselves to their communities and to potential users beyond. The National Library hosts an important service that is designed to promote and publicise the work of public libraries—the Australian Libraries Gateway. This portal to more than 1520 public libraries receives half a million searches a year. Complementing such awareness-raising initiatives are other initiatives that translate awareness and interest into actual access.

Services such as interlibrary loans are one major form of resource sharing. In 1997 about a million items were loaned by libraries to other

libraries, 100 000 of them involving public libraries. Recently a major benchmarking study of interlibrary loans was conducted by the National Resource Sharing Working Group—a body set up by the National Library. The survey showed that automated library processes are the most effective and efficient means of resource sharing and that libraries should add and maintain their holdings to union catalogues—practices public libraries across Australia are increasingly adopting.

One new national service, which has only been operating for a matter of months, is Copies Direct. It enables library users across the nation to order copies of just about anything from the National Library's Collection—from a newspaper clipping to a transcript of an oral history recording—and have it delivered electronically. Another brand-new service—Ask Now!—takes the job description of reference librarian to a whole new level. Ask Now!, which uses innovative new US-designed software, enables users of libraries participating in the service to email a reference librarian in real time and get an answer to any question, usually in a matter of minutes. Essentially, Ask Now! is a real-time interactive chat room, which allows a reference librarian and a user to view and navigate websites

simultaneously, in search of an answer to the question posed.

Ask Now! was developed and is operated by the Council of Australian State Libraries, which comprises the National Library and the various state libraries. Public libraries in the ACT and a small but growing number of other public libraries are signing up for the 12-month pilot of the service. Already, just months after the service was launched, 41 per cent of inquiries are coming from regional and rural areas. In the first three months of operation, 3000 questions were posed and answered. The average wait time was one minute, and the average transaction time was 11 minutes. Ask Now! is the kind of thing many adult Australians will fervently wish had been around when they were at school or university. It is also possibly something the teachers of today will have to learn to love (how does one correctly cite a chat room conversation with a reference librarian in the bibliography to an essay?).

Public libraries have been changed by technology as profoundly as any other sector of our society, but Australians as a whole seem to like the transformation. The public library is still a place where one can sit all day in a comfortable chair, reading the newspaper in the sun. It is still a place for toddler story time. It is still a place where you can seek out the large-print edition of that new novel. But it is also a place where one can search online for a job, or borrow a DVD or have an online conversation with a reference librarian thousands of kilometres away.

There is even a new peak body to represent the interests of public libraries around the country: Public Libraries Australia, formed just last year, with administrative support from the National Library.

Kay Poustie has worked in the library and information sector for four decades, most of the time in public libraries in Victoria and Western Australia. Now Chair of the Library Board of Western Australia, she has been a part of the transformation of public libraries in Australia and sees their community role deepening and strengthening as the information age gathers pace.

Poustie can remember when 'technological innovation' for a librarian meant using a stencil machine to produce multiple copies of a document.

She agrees that automation and digitisation have rendered libraries unrecognisable, yet she insists that the good feeling you get when you walk through the door of a public library in 2003 is the same as it always was. And she finds it ironic that digitisation and the Internet—the very things doomsayers warned would sound the death knell of public libraries—have been central to their reinvention, making them more visited and more valued than ever before, by a greater range of users.

In fact, recent statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that libraries are the second-most frequented cultural venue in the country. More than 93 million visits were made to public libraries in Australia in 1999–2000, resulting in the loan of 162 million books and other items. Almost 40 per cent of Australians visit a public library at least once a year. Two-thirds of those make at least half a dozen visits.

Asked to predict where public libraries will go next, Kay Poustie talks of services like Ask Now! going '24/7'—24 hours a day, seven days a week. She talks about radio frequency identification, which will enable borrowers to simply walk out of the library past an electronic sensor that will 'read' the microchips embedded in the books they carry, and another chip embedded in the library card in the borrower's pocket. She says that in Singapore, library users are already self-checking books they wish to borrow at electronic checkouts. In Denmark, robots are sorting returned books.

But the thing Poustie would really like to see above all others is for the sign denoting an Australian public library to be as familiar and as compelling to every Australian child as the 'golden arches' of McDonalds.

Perhaps if they offered plastic toys with every book borrowed?

PENELOPE LAYLAND is a Canberra writer and journalist

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