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Public library building and development: Understanding community consultation and the design process

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Abstract

There is an increasing focus on the public library's role as a place of and for the community, that should have at its heart the needs of that community. In this respect the development of new or renovated public libraries offers an opportunity for the design of these new buildings to reflect the needs and wants of the communities they serve. The aim of this project was to develop an in-depth understanding of the views and approaches of both librarians and architects involved in public library development projects in Australia. Using data gathered through semi-structured interviews this paper explores notions of community-focused design and co-design and the implications of involving the community in the process of library design for six public library development projects. Participants described a range of community engagement activities, relating benefits and challenges to the community consultation process. However, it was noted that there was also a curated nature to this input, and there was little evidence of community engagement extending beyond consultation to truly participatory design.

Keywords: Australia, co-design, community, consultation, participatory design, public libraries.

Introduction

Australia's public libraries serve vital roles within their communities. As recent research has shown, the purpose and function of these institutions has evolved over recent decades to encompass far more than the traditional resource delivery remit associated with libraries (Hider et al., 2022a). Public libraries now serve as community hubs, delivering not only physical resources but safe spaces for social interaction and engagement. As the role of libraries and the needs of their users have changed, so, too, have the requirements of the physical library buildings themselves.

The importance of public libraries' physical spaces has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with many users expressing how much they have missed visiting their local libraries, even when online and 'click and collect' alternatives were available to them (Garner et al. 2021; Wakeling et al. 2021). A recent study indicated that these spaces were missed for a wide range of reasons, and at different levels: users missed various aspects of the atmosphere, library resources, as well as the numerous activities that they would otherwise have been doing in their libraries (Hider et al., 2022b). This suggests that the design of these physical spaces is also important, and that the often-keen sentiments users have about 'their' spaces should be given very careful consideration in the design process.

While libraries frequently make claims about the user-centredness of their services and operations, public library authorities still tend to express their mission in terms of how their libraries are *for* their communities, rather than *of* their communities (Barniskis, 2016). Thus, public libraries reach out to their prospective users, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, instead of these groups and the whole community being given oversight, or at least a major say, in *their* public libraries and the way in which *their* services and spaces are developed. The design or redesign of public libraries' physical spaces is a prime opportunity

for communities to become more involved in the future direction of their libraries and, as a result, become more engaged with them.

Large amounts of time, effort and resources are put into designing and re-designing public library spaces across Australia every year, from single rooms to whole multi-floor buildings (State Library of New South Wales, 2021). Several guides specifically on public library design have been published (e.g., Schlipf, 2020; Worpole, 2013), but they provide a framework only. There is a need, therefore, to understand the processes and practices that accompany the development and redesign of public library spaces. In particular, there is a need to identify the extent to which library users and other stakeholders are involved at different stages of the design process, what this involvement consists of, and the extent to which it informs the eventual design of the space. While library development projects commonly report the inclusion of some form of 'consultation' or 'co-design' exercise, there appears to be no standard, accepted way for communities to be engaged in the development of new library spaces.

This article reports the findings of a study of six recent public library development projects. Utilising interviews with librarians and architects involved in these projects, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: How are the needs, views and ideas of community stakeholders identified during public library development projects, and at what stage of the design process?
- RQ2: To what extent do community needs, views and ideas inform the final design of new or redeveloped public library spaces?

Literature Review

The design of physical library spaces has been discussed in the literature for very many years, and there are a number of guides available to librarians looking to plan and construct new buildings or refurbish existing ones (e.g., Dewe, 2006; Khan, 2009; Leeder & Frierson, 2014; McCarthy, 2007; Piotrowicz & Osgood, 2010; Schlipf, 2020; Woodward, 2010). The advice to be found in these books tends to emphasise consideration of the functions of the library in question, which nowadays usually extend well beyond the storage and processing of physical materials. The recommended starting point, therefore, is an evaluation of the way existing spaces meet—or fail to meet—the functional requirements of library operations and services (Baleiko, 2019; Dewe, 2006; Feinberg & Keller, 2010).

Because of the emphasis on functionality, and because of the way ongoing changes in specific operations and services can affect the functional requirements of library spaces, a key feature built into much contemporary library design is flexibility. Schlipf (2011) notes that ‘one of the most basic truths about library buildings is that library needs change and buildings must adapt’ (p. 244). The importance of a flexible design is reiterated both for new buildings (Baleiko, 2019; Schlipf, 2020) and the renovation of existing buildings (Bell & Cottrell, 2015). Such flexibility may involve open plans and rearrangeable furniture (Schlipf, 2020; Watson & Howden, 2013).

Nevertheless, flexible spaces will always have limits, and their design needs to be based on the general functions of the particular library, which ultimately relate to how it serves, or intends to serve, its users. There may also be other overarching design principles at play, such as those that may relate to a broader ideological agenda. For example, designs may be required to demonstrate ‘sustainability’, including environmental sustainability; this could result in a focus on energy use, for instance (Piotrowicz & Osgood, 2010).

Bell and Cottrell (2015) note that the interior design of a public library 'should be singularly unique and should reflect the library's purpose within that particular community' (p. 83). Library design should, in this way, directly reference the library's use and users, with the involvement of the 'library community' needed to ensure fitness for purpose, especially given today's de-emphasis on the physical collections and an expanding range of activities that visitors are doing in library spaces (Dewe, 2006; Sternheim & Bruijnzeels, 2013; Watson, 2013b). Therefore Allan (2013) notes the importance of designing for people, not books. This includes considering the ambience and emotional impact of the space and, in some cases, the introduction of new technology and services that set out to specifically enhance the visitor experience (Feinberg & Keller, 2010; Watson, 2013a).

Designing for the stakeholders and the whole 'library community' should also involve consideration of the other key group of users, apart from clients; that is, the library staff (Khan, 2009; Watson & Howden, 2013). The exact way in which the various groups of stakeholders should input into the design process is not clearly covered in the literature, however. One of the more straightforward scenarios that has been discussed on occasion is the development of the design through workshops involving representatives from all the groups. Nimmo (2012) recommends a series of three workshops, in which views on what is needed are first collected, followed by discussion on design options put forward by the architect, and then by the 'consolidation of preferred option' (p. 205), representing, ideally at least, a consensus amongst the various stakeholders.

This kind of scenario appears to be the default design process, as reported in the literature, in which architects, librarians, end-users, and other stakeholders, all play their part, but where the design work itself is left to the 'design professional.' However, consulting the community about what will work in the local context does not need to represent the limit of 'lay' involvement. In a more participatory design process, community members can contribute

their views on what is needed and on the designers' ideas, and their own design ideas.

Related to this approach is the notion that the community should *own* the building project, because it is *their* building: For Hapel (2020), 'the building belongs to the community; it is the citizens who own the library, not the staff or the politicians' (p. 403). A design process that goes beyond the consultative is more likely to result in community ownership and a greater level of community engagement. In fact, for some writers, a participatory design process defines community engagement, that is, one 'involving local people in decision making, service planning and development as *equal* partners' (Khan, 2009, p. 76). As Dogunke (2020) explains, participatory or co-design is not just about asking the users what they want; users are an integral part of the design team. Indeed, for Clugston (2013), participatory design is 'a methodology that places the end user of a space at the heart of the design process' (p. 250).

Considering participatory design in practice, Farkas (2019) concluded that it 'is more than a needs assessment, a focus group, or even an ethnographic study—stakeholders actively contribute to defining problems and designing solutions' (p. 56). However, what this looks like in detail has not been fully discussed in the context of library design, even though a growing number of cases have been reported over the past two decades (e.g., Dalsgaard, 2012; Dalsgaard & Eriksson, 2013; Hapel, 2020; Heenop et al., 2019).

A particular focus of the application of co-design has been library spaces for children and young people (Bernier et al., 2014; Feinberg & Keller, 2010; Vandermark, 2003; Yip et al., 2020), but cases also include those of more general spaces in public and academic libraries. These cases incorporate certain methods or design approaches that were deemed successful, though how they might be optimally configured in any given design process is not always clear. Jalees (2020), for example, describes using the following design thinking methods involving user participants to improve signage in a library: empathising, defining,

brainstorming/ideating, prototyping, and testing. Similar methods are described by Dogunke (2020), Passehl-Stoddart and Snipes (2020), and Wessels et al. (2012). Typically, participants' ideational and generative ideas are collected in workshops and fed directly into the design work being carried out by the architect.

The literature indicates that there is a range of ways to embed participatory elements into the design process, just as there are different ways, and different points, to consult with stakeholders. Also, it is not always be clear where the boundaries between consultation and co-design lie. For instance, Cohen et al. (2005) developed a 'Visual Scan' process that focused on the library experience; Meunier and Eigenbrodt (2014) have described using the design process to build a community of users; and Rodríguez and Barreto (2019) used focus group sessions to develop a plan to renovate existing library space to offer new services.

Whether efforts such as these involve patrons as equal partners in the actual design activity is not obvious. As well as the use of suitable methods and approaches, successful co-design would appear to require careful consideration of how their use is to be integrated into the overall design process. Thus Wessels et al. (2012) suggest that 'citizen and stakeholder contributions can only feed into the planning process if there is a framework that facilitates the integration of these types of contributions' (p. 12).

While the literature is generally in favour of participatory approaches, the detailed description and analysis of their application in library design is scarce. One implementation issue that has been noted, however, is the potential power imbalance, not just between designer and user, but also between librarian and user. Farkas (2019) observes how this issue epitomises a broader political conundrum, in which powerful elites provide services to those unempowered; in the case of the traditional paradigm of librarianship, the librarian provides 'their' library's services *for* the user, rather than the community co-designing and co-creating its own services. Dogunke (2020) notes that many projects labelled as 'participative' focus on

the involvement of staff and regard patrons as an external factor (p. 249). Nevertheless, librarians are also part of the library community and so need to be involved as much as the users in the co-design process. Accordingly, Leeder and Frierson (2014) imagine a library of the future in which users and librarians share power and collaborate in a model of 'radical trust' (p. 15). Such a model might readily support, perhaps, the concept of co-design.

Method

The aim of the project was to develop an in-depth understanding of the views and approaches of both librarians and architects involved in public library development projects. It also sought to explore the extent of community engagement in the design of new or redeveloped library spaces. Therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted using semi-structured interviews with librarians and architects as the data collection technique.

Purposive sampling was used to identify potential participants. An initial list of library design projects was drawn up from projects shortlisted for the Australian Library Design Awards in recent years (the precise years of selection are not given, in order to protect the anonymity of participants). The Australian Library and Information Association organise the biennial Australian Library Design Awards to showcase excellent library design for the 21st century. All the commended, highly commended, and winning libraries provide examples of modern interiors and/or exteriors where excellence in design has been achieved in small or large projects that include new builds, renovations, and refurbishments. The Awards are judged by both library and design professionals from Australia and the United Kingdom. Six projects were chosen to ensure diverse geographic representation across different states, namely New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia. The participating libraries were located in major cities or suburbs, with diverse communities in terms of culture, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.

Ethics approval to undertake the research was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Charles Sturt University before the interviews commenced (H21465).

Participants were contacted initially by email in January and February 2022 and followed-up by telephone to arrange the interview time. A total of 12 interviews were conducted with five librarians and seven architects: one librarian had been involved in two projects; one project involved two architectural firms. The interviews lasted between 28 and 60 minutes and were conducted by one member of the research team using the Zoom video-conferencing platform. During the semi-structured interviews participants were asked a series of questions about the conception of the project and their involvement in the design process, and how community consultation was undertaken (see Appendix 1 for the full interview schedule). Once all interviews were complete, they were transcribed verbatim using Grain online software and manually checked for accuracy by the interviewer. Transcripts were then sent to participants, who were encouraged to amend or supplement their responses.

In a pre-coding phase (Saldaña, 2016, p. 20), four of the authors each independently and inductively coded interviews for the initial themes for one of the projects, with the concepts identified and noted on the transcripts. The research team then met to cross-verify and create a final broad codebook, and the transcripts and codebook were then uploaded into NVivo qualitative analysis software. This software allowed for parallel coding by two of the researchers. An initial 'pilot code' was undertaken on one interview by two researchers and this was compared and discussed to ensure alignment and to ensure coder reliability (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019, pp. 313, 316). The remaining coding was completed by one of the coders; the codes were then analysed by the whole research team.

As ethics approval for the research included a provision that no organisations or individuals should be identifiable in the reporting of the research, it is not possible to provide detailed information about the participants or their projects. Since the guarantee of anonymity extends

to participants recognising each other (i.e., librarians should not be able to identify architects who worked on their projects), each librarian and architect has been assigned a random identifier (L1 to L5 for librarians, A1 to A7 for architects). These identifiers are not paired, so L2 and A2 were not working on the same project.

Findings

Background to projects – rationale and timescales

All librarians who participated in the research were asked to provide some brief background to the library development projects with which they were involved, including the rationale behind the need for the development work, and the scope and duration of the project. Several factors were found to have acted as catalysts for the development of new or significantly renovated library buildings. Most frequently mentioned was the age of the existing library, which in many cases was deemed to be ‘no longer fit for purpose.’ In one case the library had been found not to meet modern building codes, while another was described as ‘falling apart.’ Some librarians described how there had been deliberations about whether to attempt renovation work or build a new library, with the latter option winning out; as one librarian put it, ‘it’s a better financial decision for the future to not invest in aging infrastructure but to build something that’s going to meet the needs of the council and the community going forward’ (L1).

Linked to the age of older libraries was the fact that in many cases they were considered too small to meet the demands of communities that had often grown significantly since their original construction. In addition, the ways in which libraries are now used—particularly a need for more open spaces and rooms for community use—meant that older libraries were no longer meeting use needs: ‘That library was way too small for the size of the community and the way the community used the library as well’ (L5). In some cases, this had led to increasingly vocal demand from local communities for a new library, which was cited by

some librarians as an important driver of the development projects. In one case a librarian explained that the old library was located in a building not owned by the council, and that they had been informed their tenancy would cease, while another librarian noted that location was a key factor, with the old library being too far from major population areas.

There was some variation in the length of time taken for projects to move from original conception to completion. In some cases, librarians described long processes taking more than ten years. These tended to be larger projects, with new buildings incorporating not just libraries but other council buildings. Librarians involved in these projects also described changing political motivations, and changes to individuals in key council roles, which served to alter the direction and momentum behind the project. Other projects moved much more quickly, with building work completed within five years, and in one case three years, of conception.

Inputs on design

The main focus of the interviews with both librarians and architects was on the ways in which stakeholders of all types were able to provide inputs into the development of the new public library space, and the extent to which these inputs informed the eventual design. The findings related to these issues have been organised into four subsections: *who* input was gathered from, *what approaches to community consultation* were used, *when and how* these consultations happened, and the *extent to which* these inputs informed the design process.

Who

All participants stated that the local community had been consulted as part of their development projects. Those consulted can be separated into three categories – community groups, individual community members, and council staff and elected members.

Community groups

Most often participants mentioned engagement with community groups. A large number of such groups were mentioned by interviewees including disability groups, Indigenous groups, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) groups, Rotary Clubs and/or business groups, senior citizens groups, local history groups, art groups, and youth groups. In many cases, participants cited these groups as examples, so it is likely that this list is not exhaustive. Such groups were seen by participants as providing authoritative input on behalf of the sections of the community they represented. As one architect put it:

So we also had consultations with a disability group, which specifically spoke about the needs of not just disabled persons, but we also had to talk about other people which might have needs. So not just a physical disability, but intellectual disability. We had a rap group that came in. So just ensuring that from a cultural awareness perspective - because there's quite a large Indigenous population that lives in [name of place]- as a space that people from a First Nations background could also come in and feel comfortable operating within. Even talking to a youth group as well, they came in and spoke on behalf of younger children and teenagers. (A2)

In most cases, it was librarians, rather than architects, who described identifying and interacting with these groups. For most projects, consultation with these specific community groups supplemented wider forms of community consultation – opportunities for *any* interested community members to provide input, usually at forums such as public meetings or stands at local events, or through online comments (see the How section).

Individual members of the community

As well as direct consultation with community groups and open public consultations, most libraries also engaged with individual community members. As one librarian put it, ‘certain

people in the community were tapped on the shoulder' (L5). In some cases, these individuals were identified as representative of certain community groups:

So there were people with different skillsets, just to make sure that we had a range of reps from the community, truly represented. So we had young people, we had retired people, we had professionals, we had people that worked in other community settings. So there was a whole range. (L5)

Interestingly, while the selection of specific groups or individuals was usually framed in terms of ensuring that diverse community voices were given the opportunity to provide input, one participant described an additional driver. They suggested that certain groups and individuals who were potentially averse to the project were deliberately involved in the consultation process:

You know, there's usually a hardcore group of people opposed to it throughout the whole process, but it didn't happen because they created this community reference group, and it had, um, representatives from key groups that could potentially become those types of, um, what would you call it? ... Agitators. (L4)

Council staff and elected members

In addition to the community, other key stakeholders were found to have had input into the design. As might be expected, for all projects members of the council were identified by architects and librarians as key contributors of feedback and ideas, with elected members in particular appearing to play an important role, e.g., 'there was a significant amount of consultation, particularly with the elected members' (L4). Some participants noted that this wasn't without its difficulties, with one in particular being somewhat scathing about the elected members' contribution: 'they'll argue about anything and all on party political grounds... councillors came along to the workshop, and then basically grandstanded and took

over the workshop, as councillors do' (L2). For the most part, participants stated that elected councillors' input tended to be 'broad' rather than specific, with council staff providing more detailed comments. Of those council staff, librarians were naturally the most commonly mentioned group providing input, although in some cases more senior council executives were involved.

Library mediation

One significant finding to emerge from the interviews was the extent to which the communication of community needs and expectations was mediated by librarians and other council officers. While all projects incorporated some community consultation, in many cases this consultation was facilitated by librarians, who then reported back to the architects. For example, one librarian described how senior citizens were represented in this way: 'Within that working group, we had representation from the senior citizens, not the senior citizens group themselves, but council officers whose responsibility was to liaise with the group' (L3). Perhaps more surprisingly, a small number of participants admitted soliciting certain types of community feedback. For example, 'there were times where we steered the community reference group in certain directions, for sure' (L4).

Approaches to community consultation

Participants described a wide range of approaches they used to consult with local communities. These included reference groups, library events and displays, events outside the library, and surveys.

Reference groups

The interviews revealed a range of ways that librarians and architects sought input on designs. All projects had a formal group – variously called a Reference Group, Project Control Group, Development Group, End User Group, or Advisory Group – but the make-up and purpose of these groups varied. In some cases, these groups were predominantly made up

of council and library staff and had decision-making power. In other cases, the groups were more community led, and were the primary means for community input to be communicated to architects. Of this latter type of group, participants provided these descriptions:

The community advisory group as a concept worked really well for that building, because they were true representatives of their community. So there was people with different skillsets, just to make sure that we had the range of reps from the community, truly representative. So we had young people, we had retired people, we had professionals, we had people that worked in other community settings. So there was a whole range, there was teachers. So there was, we had a whole range of people there.

(L4)

A group of 12 ... became the community advisory group. Yeah. We had monthly meetings with them initially. Then it was probably bi-monthly or quarterly ... certainly when decisions needed to be made that we wanted the community to have input in there were quite regular meetings ... the architects came to a couple of those advisory group meetings. (L5)

Participants did not describe these groups undertaking any specific design activities. Instead, they tended to be described as holding relatively formal discussions within which community representatives were able to provide input and feedback from the perspective of the groups they represented.

Library events and displays

Another commonly mentioned approach to soliciting community feedback was through events or displays at the existing library building. Activities here ranged in scope from the collection of feedback forms to the display of concept drawings of the proposed library. In the case of one library, a more involved event was planned, as the architect described:

We did have a weekend in the library space ... We printed off some of the large plans and put out some prepared some physical models. And I think it was a Friday, Saturday, Sunday, we had council basically just put it out there. It said, like, come meet the architects, come talk to them, have your say. And we put up panelboards with post-it notes that people could use to say, what are the things you really want to see in the building? What are the things you don't want to see? What would it take you to come and use that building? Which obviously they were writing free coffee, things like that, as they do, but it was just great to see that the community engage with it and they were really excited about. (A2)

As part of the same project another event was held at the old library, this time providing an opportunity for the community to discuss the development with library and council staff:

We did a pop up out there for a whole day. There was myself, and a few of the general managers even came out and answered questions. So it wasn't just, I guess, lower-level employees out there. It was actually the general managers coming out and listening to what people had to say. So that was really important and a very good, I think visual representation of how important it was that the general manager would come down and be involved. (L1)

As part of a different project, the architect spoke of what they called a 'placemaking workshop' held at the library, intended to generate initial formative ideas about the design of the new library: 'it was all conducted in a large space with lots of Blu Tack and post-it stickers, and everyone sitting at tables in a very civilized manner, sometimes going into groups, and filling out scorecards' (A4).

Events outside the library

As well as events at the old library, many participants described gathering community input either at community events, or in community spaces outside the library. Several interviewees described using local shopping centres for this purpose:

The boards were exhibited in the shopping mall, and different, other areas in [location] for two weeks and then people could have a look, you know, and post some comments. (A7)

I would go out on a couple of them, like out of the shopping centres, things like that... it's, you know, the main point where everyone goes shopping in the local area. So that's why it was really important to go out there and have one of the pop-ups in the middle of the shopping centre and ask the questions and get some feedback. And we had the model and what we thought it would look like and ease, concerns, those sorts of things. (L1)

One interviewee described a similar outreach event held at a local retirement village, while other described how events such as markets and festivals were utilised. One architect spoke of their experience at a community fair:

there was a stall set up. And so the architects and the council staff involved in the project, we were there for a few hours and people would come up to us and talk to us and give us immediate feedback. (A5)

Surveys

Other means of generating community feedback were described by participants. Several libraries utilised surveys to canvass the views of users. These were typically described as being online surveys, with users either invited by email, or from links on the library website.

For two projects the surveys were available in print – in one case delivered to people's letterboxes, and in the other via paper copies available from the library.

How and when

Participants described engaging with the community at various stages of their projects, with a significant amount of consultation occurring at the pre-design stage. Architects, in particular, described using the various approaches described above to get a sense of what was important to library users, both practically and aesthetically, in order to inform the process of designing of the new building. As one participant put it, ‘the community reference group was, was heavily involved ... and really established the parameters to progress to detailed design’ (L4). Another librarian described this as a process of ‘getting a feel of what the community wanted,’ continuing:

The community was quite clear in the kinds of words they used around what they wanted. Accessible and inclusive, flexible, modern, welcoming spaces, innovative ... They even used words like, I did write some of them down, generous, fresh, flowing, iconic, comfortable, organic, surprising, informal, soft, and fun ... I think authenticity in the community consultation processes is really important. Like, you know, letting people, choose the words around how they want it to feel and then giving those to the architects. (L2)

Another librarian put it more succinctly: ‘We asked the community what they wanted and then we delivered it’ (L5). For some projects, this initial pre-design phase consultation was the only true community engagement, with subsequent feedback sought only from librarians and council members. For others, the community engagement continued throughout the project. In the case of one project, the architects were charged with producing three conceptual designs from which the community then chose to be the basis for eventual development. In other cases, librarians and architects described a more iterative process, with

consultation taking place at various stages throughout the design phase. For one project, the librarian noted in relation to the community consultation group that ‘when the design was still taking shape, the architects came along to a few of those meetings’ (L5), and as noted above another project displayed models and drawings of the design for user feedback. Two other projects appear to have taken an even more involved approach to ongoing consultation. One librarian described the approach as follows:

We kept that community reference group actively engaged, and also the elected members. So as the design would hit milestones [the architects] would come back to those groups for feedback. They started with a step where they just had a basic footprint of the building and they sort of shaded areas for particular purposes. And then it's just like a configuration process, and that came to us for feedback. And then they took that away and made changes and then come back to us with like a detailed design where you've actually got furniture and, um, you know, really specific areas. And then final step is around fixtures and fittings basically, which sort of happened once construction had started. (L4)

One architect used the term ‘co-design’ to describe their process of iterative design, which they explained in some detail:

So we had, we had this process, we call it a co-design process. So basically, it's where design and consultation run concurrently. So I have a team of designers working away behind the scenes. And then my two leading designers and myself would go to the consultations or workshops, we would then come back, feed that information straight back into the design team. Then we'd sort of tick, tack back and forth to the next workshop the week after. So at least it was happening live and in parallel, as opposed to trying to formulate a brief to begin with, then go away and design. We find

that if we take that approach, you're basically tracking it live and the design is evolving as it goes. And then the following week, you get things that change, or we need to tweak things. You can again, feed that information straight back into the design. (A2)

Influence of community engagement

In general, most participants spoke positively about the influence of community engagement on the new library building. There were, however, some interviewees who highlighted negative aspects of the process. The following subsections deal with these positive and negative reflections in turn.

Positive perspectives

From librarians there was a clear sense of pride in the projects, often related to the ways in which the needs of the community had been considered as an integral part of the design process. This was sometimes expressed in general terms: 'I've probably spoken to what went particularly well, which I think was the community consultation and how we use that to deliver, um, spaces that were what people wanted' (L2). Architects, too, spoke about how their engagement with the community had influenced the design, although often in quite general terms, for example: 'working with, with the different stakeholders was actually very well organised, and very informative, you know, for the design' (A7). One architect described the satisfaction of being able to incorporate community wishes into the new building, and was able to provide a specific example:

I think one of the biggest things is the reflection of the community within the building. And I guess being a part of all that consultation, I can see directly where, you know, the art group said, 'we really want this in our project' and we were able to get it in

and to see that space being used how they actually intended it to is really, really rewarding. (A5)

Another architect spoke about how initial conceptual ideas from the community fed through into their design:

Look, one of the first meetings we had with one of the community groups ... they were talking about this idea of almost like a honeycomb or like a beehive. So I guess different parts of the building sort of had different activities going on. And so we sort of took that idea. So when you walk into the building, basically there's sort of a central foyer area, but you can see up into the other spaces. (A3)

This was echoed in the comments of a librarian, who similarly described how the community's broad aesthetic considerations were incorporated into the new building:

the theme was to have a sort of a beach themed library with a light airy feel, and it to be sort of playful cause it was near the beach. And I think the architects absolutely delivered on the ambiance that the community was looking for. (L2)

While participants generally described the influence of community consultation as being in this conceptual/aesthetic realm, one librarian noted a way in which community views had influenced the layout of the new library, explaining that consultation had clearly shown a preference for clearly delineated spaces, something which the architects were able to realise:

In the community's opinion the library actually has two very distinct areas. There's one children's area and there's one adult area ... it's a walkthrough and the design is such that it's not obvious that that is what it is, but if you want to segregate it, that's what it is. Adults coming into the library to either study or work on the computers, or read a book, read a paper, whatever it is that they want to do, they love that they are

not being bothered by storytime or, you know, afterschool activities or any of that because they tend to be noisy ... So the community loves that. (L5)

One librarian also spoke very positively about the impact of the community engagement work, not only in terms of its influence on the design, but also for more pragmatic reasons:

So the community reference group was actually a really key group in the design process. And I think one of the reasons why we achieved such good outcomes and very little community angst about the project ... It was the biggest infrastructure investment the council's ever done. Despite that there wasn't that group in the community that was out there with pitchforks and flaming torches, which often you get when you take on an ambitious project. (L4)

Negative perceptions

There was, however, one participant who had a markedly different opinion on the value of community consultation. This architect was remarkably frank, and distinctly cynical about the role consultation plays in public building construction. They began by noting that, despite conducting multiple rounds of community engagement, ‘the substantive things that were said really boiled down to a couple of sentences’ (A6). They continued:

You do consult, but the important things that come out of the consultation probably you'd get in the first 10 minutes. You have to be listening carefully and if you find them, then you can localise the design and give a design response that does respond to those particular needs. But the other danger with community consultation is who consults? I mean the four or five vocal people who run the local P&C and stick their hands up for everything else. And they come along and somehow they think they've got the right to tell you they don't like orange, so you can't have any orange in the building? (A6)

While the architect notes here that there can be some value in consultation, specifically in terms of ‘localising the design’, they rejected the notion that the community should be more active collaborators in the design process, instead essentially characterising community consultation as a form of window-dressing:

You don't let them design it because they're not designers and they'll ask for crazy things. And if you give them the impression that they are allowed to design, the whole process goes as likely as not goes off the rails, trying to achieve something that is a) unachievable and b) unaffordable. So most of the time you want community to feel an ownership of the project. And the best way of doing that is to have them feel as if they've been consulted. (A6)

The architect concluded their argument with a strongly stated critique of the consultation process, highlighting the ‘curated’ nature of community consultation:

And you definitely don't listen to the community because when it comes down to it, I mean, I've been to so many community consultation meetings, pretty much all the same, they're fairy floss and lollipops ... They're generally very positive, but not very helpful ... They ask for the wrong things. They really do. No, community consultation at all levels of government is very much curated and you shouldn't believe otherwise because they'll tell you it's not curated, because the community doesn't want to be controlled, but it certainly is. And it's the same around the world and it's the same on every project, and the bigger the project, the more it's controlled. (A6)

While this architect was very much the exception, others did note some challenges with the community consultation process. One noted the frustration of having to engage with ideas that, from the architect's perspective, were not feasible:

There were some areas where you're being challenged in terms of your design nous ... you're basically almost being forced to consider certain ideas ... which you know, that is not just going to work ... it is frustrating for us as architects, but we also understand that's part of what we do. That's part of the process that we've got to go through to actually demonstrate that what someone's asked for isn't actually going to work. (A2)

A similar sentiment is discernible in comments made by another architect, whose project involved a community vote to select one of three designs the architect had proposed:

Well, the fact that we had to do the community consultation and they chose the right option [laughs], obviously that was very, very successful, I would have a very different opinion if they have chosen an option that we were not as happy with. (A7)

Of note here is the implication that the community consultation was an imposition rather than a valued part of the design process. There is also a clear sense that the consultation was only 'successful' because its results aligned with the architect's own views. These final two examples may suggest that while only one architect was truly dismissive of community input into design, others may share some negative perceptions of the process.

Discussion

It is clear from the findings that all the projects included in the study involved active efforts to consult with local communities. Indeed, there appears to have been considerable time and effort devoted to ensuring community views were heard. Participants variously mentioned workshops, reference groups, surveys, focus groups and stands at community events, all of which represent relatively well-established approaches to engaging with users. There are, however, some interesting issues that emerge from the analysis of librarians' and architects' descriptions of these approaches.

The first relates to RQ1, and concerns *who* from the community is involved in the process.

The interview data suggests two broad strategies are employed. The first is to consult with the community as a whole, through public events (held at libraries or other community-centric locations) and surveys that are open to everyone. This approach seemed most often to be used to canvass relatively high-level feelings and desires related to the new building, or to provide feedback on a proposed design. The second strategy is to engage with specific community groups, or individuals who represent those groups. This latter strategy was typically found to involve more formal meetings, often held at regular intervals throughout the design process. For most projects in our study both strategies were employed to some degree.

It was interesting to note, however, that some participants also described a process of ‘tapping on the shoulder’ to get specific individuals to participate. This certainly makes sense from a practical perspective, in terms of ensuring that certain groups are represented, and potentially that individuals who librarians believe could make a valuable contribution are involved in the process. But the process also has some potential dangers, not least the fact that these individuals and their views are likely to be known to librarians. They may therefore serve to reinforce librarians’ preconceptions about the needs of users, rather than challenge them. This point also relates to the ways in which community views were sometimes found to be mediated through librarians to the architects, rather than communicated directly. While librarians would perhaps reject this suggestion, this does link to certain notions of power and authority previously discussed in the literature, with librarians creating a space *for*, rather than *with* their users (Farkas, 2019), and users seen as an ‘external factor’ (Dogunke, 2020, p. 249). The evidence from one participant, who indicated that the reference group had been ‘steered’ in certain directions, only serves to support this.

There was also no mention by any participants of attempts to engage with community members who did not currently use the library. Engaging with non-users is a long-standing

and difficult problem in the public library domain (Sbaffi & Rowley, 2015), and to some extent it is understandable that projects should seek to focus their efforts on understanding the needs of those most likely to use the new building. Librarians may argue, too, that the community groups with whom they engaged provided a means of understanding needs of sections of the community, rather than specifically users. Nonetheless, it does perhaps stand as something of a missed opportunity for libraries not to consider how a new library building could serve to mitigate some of the factors that serve as barriers to library use, for example the perception from certain parts of the community that the library building is intimidating (Williment, 2020).

Also related to RQ1 are the questions of how and when community consultation was conducted. For most projects the majority of consultation work occurred at a pre-design stage, although substantial work was also undertaken for some projects during the design phase. Community views were solicited through reference group meetings in most cases, as well as surveys, public events and workshops. It was notable that the specific formats of these events were often not explained by participants. In the case of workshop, particularly, it was not always clear how these events differed from, say, focus groups. While some participants mentioned tools such as post-it notes and Blu Tack, and others described presenting drawings and models, in most cases the objective seems to have been to generate spoken or written feedback. While there is no disputing the potential benefit of these sessions, they fall some way short of what can be considered co-design or participatory design. Rather, they represent opportunities for the community to say what they want but are not yet positioning users as an integral part of the design team – something at the heart of participatory design approaches (Dogunke, 2020).

The second research question focused on the influence of community consultation on the eventual design of the building. As noted in the findings section, only one architect used the

phrase ‘co-design’ to describe their process. The iterative design process they described, with weekly feedback sought from the community and incorporated into the ongoing design work, certainly represents a more systematic and formalised approach than that seen in other projects. The process comes close to providing what Wessels et al. (2012) characterise as ‘a framework that facilitates the integration of ... contributions’ (p.12) and appears to have led to practical and specific changes to the design itself. In other projects this does not appear to have been the case, with community engagement instead limited to informing the overall aesthetics – the ambience and emotional impact of the space (Watson, 2013a). One librarian was able to recall the words and phrases that emerged from initial public consultation, and link these to the eventual design, and several architects likewise recognised the ways in which they had used the somewhat abstract ideas of the community to inform the design.

It is also important to consider the views of the one architect who stood as a clear exception to the generally positive perspective that other architects provided about community engagement. Of course, it can be problematic to put too much weight on the views of a single participant, but it is worth reiterating that this architect led the design of a new public library while holding these views. It is also worth noting that while no other participants in this study expressed similar views, several did refer to challenges associated with community engagement. In dismissing the relevance of community engagement to design and highlighting the ‘curated’ nature of public feedback, this architect participant provides some evidence that community consultation can be far less influential than usually claimed. In a sense this exposes the limitations of non-participatory design processes. Far from being ‘equal partners’ in decision making (Khan, 2009, p.76), in this example at least, the community was essentially excluded in any meaningful sense from the process. Knowing the architect’s views on community consultation, the user engagement processes undertaken through the project become tokenistic, and the events they attended performative.

There is no question that all of the buildings built through the six projects covered by our study are welcome additions to their communities. There is no doubting, too, the efforts undertaken by librarians and architects to consult with communities, or the extent to which all stakeholders were committed to providing the best possible building. This study does, however, suggest some limitations to traditional models of community engagement and consultation to inform public library design.

There are some limitations to this study. It encompassed only six developments, all of which were eventually recognised by the ALIA Library Design Awards. This sampling approach means that findings are not generalisable to all public library building projects. It is also important to note that all participants were heavily involved in the projects, and therefore inclined to emphasise the positive aspects of the development process. Finally, ethics requirements prevented the reporting of any mapping of insights from the interviews to the finished buildings – for example, identifying the ways in which community feedback had been incorporated into the final library design.

Conclusion

This paper has reported the findings of a qualitative research project investigating the ways in which local communities were consulted during six public library development projects in Australia. It has found evidence that a range of techniques and approaches to community consultation were employed through these projects, including workshops, focus groups, reference groups, surveys and presentations. In most cases, the most influential engagement with the community was undertaken prior to the design process commencing, with community feedback used to inform the overall look and feel of the new building. While the extent of community engagement demonstrated in these projects is to be applauded, the study found little evidence of this engagement extending beyond consultation to participatory design. Given the positive impact of participatory design approaches found in the literature

relating not only to libraries, but design processes of all types, the findings of this research suggest that there is a need to explore how co-design can be utilised in public library developments. This work could usefully explore both the means of ensuring that design processes engage with local communities as truly equal partners, and the practical techniques and methods that can most effectively be used to generate meaningful input into design.

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Appendix

Interview questions

1. Could you please tell me, first of all, about your involvement and role in the building project?
2. How long did the whole project take, from finding the funds and support for it, to the finished building?
3. What were the main reasons why the project was funded? [librarians only]
4.
 - a. [architects only] Can you describe the tender process? Did the library already have a good idea of the sort of thing it wanted so that the tender invitation came with quite detailed specifications and parameters?

How did the tender requirements compare with other types of projects you've been involved in? Was the design chosen in competition, or the designers were first chosen and then designed?
 - b. [librarians only] Could you tell me about how the library design was commissioned? Was there a lot of work done on the tender? Did the library already have a good idea of the sort of thing it wanted, so that the tender came with quite detailed specifications and parameters?
5. Could you take me through the design process?
6. Who made the final decision on the design?
7. What were its particular strengths of the design in your opinion?
8. What feedback have you received [from the library or its users] about the new building?
9. In terms of the process, could you identify anything that went especially well, from your point of view?

10. Was there anything that was frustrating about the process? Any lessons learnt?

11. In terms of the result, why do you think the building won the award/commendation?

How does it stand out amongst other library buildings, would you say?

12. Are there any other points you would like to make about the building or the design process before we end the interview?