



# **Viclink Tour: Great Public Libraries of the World**

28 September – 17 October 2008

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## Acknowledgements

The idea of a tour for library industry staff to some of the world's great public libraries came from Christine Mackenzie and Julie Rae, two of Australia's most eminent librarians, and both chief executives of large regional library corporations in Victoria at the time that they came up with the idea. Thanks must go to each of them for the inspiration and taking the running with the organisation.

Thanks are doubly due to Christine Mackenzie. Her longstanding professional relationships with colleagues worldwide meant that the tour group received in many places the kind of hospitality that is generally reserved for the oldest and dearest of friends.

A change in employment meant that Julie Rae was ultimately not able to participate in the tour, although she did join the tour group for *The Smart Cities and its Libraries* conference in Copenhagen.

Many members of the tour group received support, in various ways, from their employers, which is gratefully acknowledged.

The Library Board of Victoria also supported the participation by Victorian public library staff through a grant of \$50,000. Additionally, the Board and the State Library of Victoria Foundation supported the participation by two of the State Library's staff. All of the Victorians on the tour are deeply grateful to the Board for seeing the value of the tour to the development of library services in Victoria and providing its support.

## Executive Summary

Prepared by Debra Rosenfeldt

On 28 September 2008 a group of fifteen Australians gathered in Singapore. They came from Victoria, Queensland and South Australia. Most worked in public libraries. All were associated with public libraries in some way. Some were supported by their employers. Others came entirely at their own expense. Every one of them was excited about the adventure ahead – twenty days on the road in six countries to see 23 of the world's best public libraries and participate in an international public library conference. It was the first time in memory that such an opportunity had been offered to the Australian library industry.

*It was the opportunity of a lifetime - thank you!* - Beck Henshall, Manager,  
Libraries and Learning, Frankston City Council

*I feel privileged to have been involved in such a forward thinking and far  
reaching endeavour.* - Alix Massina, Corporate Governance and Reporting  
Manager, State Library of Victoria

*It is always interesting to listen to colleagues from across the globe talking about  
what they consider is interesting about their libraries - how much better ...to  
actually visit and see what they talk about, but even better to see how they really  
work ...* - Karen Ward-Smith, Manager, Libraries, Arts and Heritage Services,  
City of Greater Dandenong

*The bar has been lifted and communities will be the beneficiary.* – Chris Kelly,  
Manager Libraries and Learning, Brimbank City Council

This report provides an overview of the adventure. It highlights key impressions and learnings; provides snapshots of the majority of libraries visited; and, includes copies of the presentations given to the tour group at several of the libraries and the 'Australian paper' delivered at *The Smart City and its Libraries* conference. The report supports the beginning of a discussion about the learnings from the tour, and the implications for Victoria, that will be ongoing in the public library network.

## Background

In recent years the library industry workforce has been described as being in a state of crisis. The workforce is ageing rapidly. Many libraries report difficulty in attracting new staff, especially younger staff and staff of a high professional standard. These same libraries say they have trouble holding onto talented staff. Numerous studies of workforce issues have been undertaken internationally and in Australia, including *Workforce Sustainability and Leadership* (2008), an initiative of the Victorian public library network (represented by its peak body, Viclink) and the Library Board of Victoria (represented by the State Library of Victoria).

In 2007 two Victorian public library chief executives, Julie Rae, also President of Viclink, and Christine Mackenzie, came up with the idea of a study tour primarily for Victorian public library staff to some of the world's most innovative and exciting public libraries. They wanted to provide inspiration to their colleagues, to nurture the leadership in their sector. The Library Board of Victoria agreed to modestly subsidise Victorian public library participation through the Leadership Development stream of the Statewide Public Library Development Projects, a collaboration of the Board and the public library network. Christine and Julie's idea became the Viclink Tour: Great Public Libraries of the World. Ultimately, nine of the fifteen participants were from Victorian libraries.

## Benefits to tour participants and the public library industry

It was perceived that the study tour had many potential benefits:

- New ways of seeing and valuing public libraries in the community, from countries where they are significantly better resourced and more high profile than in Australia, which would assist public library managers in their advocacy efforts.
- Specific ideas for innovation in service delivery and management practice for individual library services, gained from seeing 'first hand' some of the world's best practice.
- Practical information about how existing programs and services could be more effectively delivered, by seeing how others operate.

- New professional contacts and networks for ongoing discussion and development, especially important in a country as geographically isolated as Australia.
- Ideas for collaborative and possible statewide initiatives from countries that have long track records of success in this area.
- Revitalisation for participants who have been in the public library industry for many years and will continue to be key players for some years to come.
- Inspiration for participants who are in earlier stages of their careers and are the leaders of the future.

At the very least, it was felt that the tour would encourage participants to look 'outside the square' and to 'think big'. It was hoped that participants would return with a clearer vision of what is possible in public libraries, and with renewed enthusiasm and determination to lift the standing and the performance of public libraries in Australia.

### **Overview of the itinerary**

The tour itinerary was put together by Christine Mackenzie, drawing upon her extensive network of international contacts. The schedule was hectic. There were many libraries to see and not nearly enough time to do justice to them all. Many more libraries in the six countries visited could have been included.

The itinerary took the group to Singapore, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, The Netherlands and Hong Kong (visited in that order). The focus was on municipal public libraries but did include a few National Libraries, notably the National Library Board of Singapore; Finland's Royal Library, which is also a university library and is housed in two exquisite domed buildings; and, Denmark's stunning Royal Library, known as The Black Diamond.

Main public libraries in capital cities included Stockholm's beloved Asplund Library, opened in 1928 and named for its architect; the twelve-storey Hong Kong Central Library, opened in 2001; and, the new Amsterdam Public Library opened in 2007. At 28,000 square metres it is Europe's biggest public library.

Suburban public libraries included Singapore's newest, a five-storey colourful glass box in Bishan. The elegant Vanlose Library in Copenhagen's inner city area is another relatively new facility and was the venue for the conference, *The Smart City and its Libraries*. The Norrebro Library, also in Copenhagen, was visited by members of the tour group with a special interest in services to diverse communities. Kista Library in Stockholm and Sello Library in Helsinki provided the group with a taste of libraries in urban fringe growth corridors.

Two of the most impressive public libraries, in very different ways, were in regional centres. Delft is a city of 100,000 people located about an hour's train ride out of Amsterdam. Its new main library, DOK – Library Concept Center, is a converted supermarket and was, perhaps, the most engaging and coolest public library visited. Sweden's Malmö City Library serves a community of 300,000 located several hundred kilometres south of Stockholm. It is often cited, with some justification, as one of the world's most beautiful libraries.

A number of small special public libraries, 'boutique libraries', were visited by the tour group. These were of particular interest because Australia does not provide public library services of this kind. Singapore's Library@Esplanade is dedicated to the performing arts and this is reflected in its design, which was inspired by the idea of a theatre. Helsinki's Library 10 is focussed on music and technology. In Stockholm the group visited The House of Comics and The Children's Room, a library just for 0-11 year olds.

The complete itinerary is attached to this report.

### *The Smart City and its Libraries* conference

A highlight of the tour was *The Smart City and its Libraries* conference in Copenhagen on 8-10 October. An initiative of Copenhagen Public Library Service, Public Libraries International Network and Urban Libraries Council, the conference attracted delegates from the United States of America, Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries, as well as the group from Australia. Papers and workshops covered the economic value of libraries; renovation of library buildings; the trend toward merging libraries with other facilities such as schools, sports centres and culture houses; library services to young people and to



immigrants; virtual library services, and the unique role of public libraries in urban developments.

*The Scandinavian concept of libraries being 'the community's living room' I find very exciting. The challenge for us now is to discover how relevant this sort of concept could be in an Australian setting.* – Mandy Gatliff, Manager Family and Youth Services, Frankston City Council

Two of the Viclink tour group spoke at the conference. Debra Rosenfeldt presented a keynote paper on 'The Library as a Physical Space – a necessity in an online society' (attached to this report). At the conclusion of the conference John Murrell participated in a panel discussion on the theme of 'What have we learned?'

### **Impressions and lessons**

Twice during the tour members of the group came together to reflect on what they had seen. The following points come from the group discussion. However, it must be recognised that different parts of the tour resonated in different ways with group members depending on their personal interests and experience.

The group's reflections focussed on four main areas: investment; design; services; leadership.

### **Investment in public library infrastructure**

One of the most striking differences between public libraries in all of the countries visited and Victorian public libraries related to the investment in infrastructure. We simply don't build public libraries on a comparable scale. Bishan Public Library, a suburban branch of Singapore's library service, occupies 4,000 square metres over five levels. Sello Library, the main branch of an outer suburban library service in Helsinki, occupies 5,846 square metres over two levels. Sweden's Malmo City Library, the main library for a city similar in size and purpose to Geelong, measures 15,000 square metres. The new Amsterdam Public Library is a massive 28,000 square metres. Together with 25 branch libraries it serves a population of approximately 800,000. The Hong Kong Central Library, built over twelve levels, occupies 33,800 square

metres. By contrast, the largest public library in Victoria (opened in January 2008 at Caroline Springs) measures only 2,500 square metres.

While recognising that not every library needs to be a big library, one of the key learnings from the tour is that Australian public library space standards are low and that we need to raise expectations in this area.

## Design features

There were many elements of design in the libraries visited that impressed the tour group and will undoubtedly influence their choices when they take on the task of refurbishing an existing library or building a new library:

*I'm now wondering how to turn drab, old, metal shelves into state-of-the-art, designer quality, user friendly art pieces!* - Beck Henshall, Manager, Libraries and Learning, Frankston City Council

*I presented to my Board yesterday ... The DOK and children's libraries certainly sowed some positive thoughts for the future. The furniture blew them away!!!* – John Murrell, CEO, West Gippsland Regional Library Corporation

*... lighting, colour and key design features can transform an ordinary library into an extraordinary library – don't be afraid to be bold and design special wow factor shelving such as Amsterdam's, wow factor furniture such as DOK's.* – Jane Cowell, Senior Consultant, AECgroup

*The most important thing for me was to discover ... aspects that are immediately relevant and can be implemented now. CGD is currently redeveloping the floor plan at Dandenong Library and a number of those things will be included in our new 'look'.* – Karen Ward-Smith, Manager Libraries, Arts and Heritage, City of Greater Dandenong

Everyone in the tour group will remember:

- The integration of beautiful and/or challenging art work into many of the libraries visited

- Large areas for children, especially the under-5s, with special ‘rooms’ for storytime
- Libraries can work well over multiple levels
- Creative shelving, for example: the dramatically painted recycled timber shelves throughout DOK; Amsterdam Public Library’s sleek super-white shelving featuring exhibition cases built onto the end stands; the curved or circular shelving units in many libraries, especially in children’s areas; the ‘adventure playground’ shelving in The Children’s Room in Stockholm
- The use of lighting on and around shelves to create an inviting glow
- Gorgeous furniture, bold furniture and fun furniture, rather than ‘institutional’ furniture
- A new rule of thumb that 1/3 of the floor space is for the collection and 2/3 is for the library user, emphasising that public libraries are first and foremost about people
- The concept of ‘the void’, a high profile space in the library set aside for special things
  - exhibitions, experimentation with new technologies, programs, etc - a place that is constantly changing and always interesting
- Lively, welcoming foyer areas, for example: Sello Library, where children played in a large temporary exhibition based on a favourite Scandinavian children’s book; Malmo City Library, where the café opens off the foyer, there is fast-track internet access, lounge seating and a small selection of high interest books for borrowing
- Soft, high quality linoleum on floors can work as well as, or better than, the carpet that is favoured in Australia
- Customer service desks that can be readily height adjusted for sit down or stand up interaction
- The café or restaurant in the heart of the library

### **Service trends: opening hours, circulation and reference**

The opening hours of the larger libraries were impressive, providing the community with considerably more direct physical access than is provided by public libraries in Victoria, especially during the weekend. Singapore’s Bishan Library is open from 10am-9pm seven days a week. Amsterdam Public Library is open from 10am-10pm seven days a week. DOK – Library Concept Center is open 9am-10pm Monday to Thursday, 9am-6pm on Friday and 10am-6pm on Saturday and Sunday. During school and university exam time these hours are extended to midnight on Monday to Thursday and 10pm on Friday to Sunday.

Library 10 and Malmo City Library both open a small section of the library very early in the day (7am or 8am) in order to give customers the opportunity to visit on their way to work. Tour group members felt that this was definitely something that Victorian public libraries in busy commercial and transit areas should consider.

Only in Hong Kong were staff occupied to a significant degree with materials handling. Self service check-out and check-in of library materials, and automated sorting of returned items was standard everywhere else and must be the way of the future in Victoria, at least for busy metropolitan libraries.

Approaches to reference services on the library floor varied tremendously. Anyone seeking reference assistance at the busy Bishan Library in suburban Singapore was obliged to use the Cybrarian – a telephone connection to an operator in the central library. By contrast to this impersonal approach, there were multiple staffed reference desks in most of the European libraries. At Sello Library customers could make a 45 minute booking for a reference librarian.

The tour group was impressed by a distinct shift in the manner of handling reference enquiries on the library floor in many European libraries. There has been a move away from the formal interview style of exchange, with the librarian on one side of a desk and the customer on the other, to a less formal, friendlier and more conversational exchange, with the librarian and customer working side-by-side.

### **Service trends: enriching the library experience**

For many of the tour group Helsinki's Library 10 stands out as the library providing the most learning in the area of service delivery. In a relatively small 800 square metres of floor space, it accommodates a staggering 600,000 visitors every year, mostly male and mostly aged between 19 and 35 years – a demographic that public libraries usually struggle to attract. Its focus on music and technology is the key. But it is not just about music for listening to, although there is plenty of that; it is about opportunities to create and perform music. Customers can borrow an instrument, use a recording studio and make a CD, which others can then listen to in the library. Customers can also listen to or participate in daily live performances in the library by a wide array of local musicians. Library 10 offers a much richer

experience than libraries have traditionally offered. Many in the tour group felt that this is a real pointer for the future:

*... the library is not just a space that can be actively used but needs to actively facilitate creating creative content,  
... library staff must undertake projects that put themselves in the customer experience, eg. the Library 10 staff who wrote, performed and edited a song,  
... library staff need to create content of what happens in their libraries through podcasting and including the virtual as part of the physical experience,  
... radio, audio suites, music suites, editing suites and performance spaces all have a part to play in new libraries and facilitating the creation of cultural content,  
and libraries have a key role to play - Jane Cowell, Senior Consultant, AECgroup*

A dominant theme in all of the talks given to the tour group by library directors was that the library must create an exciting landscape for the customer if it is to remain relevant, a landscape that invites the customer to linger by being full of opportunities for exploration, adventure and creativity.

Library 10 was one of several small special public libraries visited. In Singapore the Library@Esplanade is dedicated to the performing arts. Meetingpoint@lasipalatsi in Helsinki is a library facility specialising in e-support services. Stockholm's special public libraries included The House of Comics, The Reading Room, the International Library and The Children's Room. All of these libraries are spectacularly successful in reaching specific target groups. The Children's Room has been so well embraced by the Stockholm community that the library has had to install traffic lights in the window. When the lights are red customers know that the library is full and that they must wait to enter, or come back another time. The tour group was strongly of the view that the small special public library delivery model could have application in some of Australia's capital city and regional city libraries.

When tour group members talked about the service innovations that they'd like to try in their own libraries they came mostly from the special or boutique public libraries:

*There are many great ideas I'd like to implement from the tour: PC Doctor (providing IT support for members); loaning musical instruments, community*

*artwork and IT equipment; redesigning our website to be interactive, engaging and able to 'mash up'!* - Beck Henshall, Manager, Libraries and Learning, Frankston City Council

*I have already spoken with our local youth worker about musical instruments and using the library as a venue for a youth concert.* – Camille Cullinan, Manager Cultural Development and Libraries, Swan Hill Rural City Council

The group was generally impressed by the strong emphasis on culture in the Scandinavian countries and The Netherlands, and specifically on supporting the development of children using public libraries as a key player. The Children's Room is the prime example of this, but every public library seemed to dedicate a larger proportion of floor space to young children than we are accustomed to seeing. The spaces were invariably beautifully fitted-out and almost all contained a small room customised for 'story time'. While Library 10 specialised in music, most public libraries also dedicated a larger proportion of floor space to music, film, and other non-book media than is the norm in Australian public libraries. Several contained pianos and recording studios for public use. A few had their own community radio stations. DOK – Library Concept Center, in Delft, uniquely housed an art collection. Customers can select from amongst 4,000 original pieces of art, which can be borrowed for up to six months. The majority of libraries incorporated art works in their interior design.

## **Leadership qualities**

*The most valuable things for me were hearing from our colleagues that libraries can and do have an exciting future; that libraries are about people, not about books; and the commitment that cities in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands have to their public libraries. I loved how Hans van Velsen from Amsterdam City Library said - yes we cost 1 million euro a month to operate and yes, that's a lot of money, but we are worth it and for the value that the city gets from the library, it is cheap.* – Christine Mackenzie, Chief Executive Officer, Yarra Plenty Regional Library Service

Amsterdam's Hans van Velsen was one of several library directors who spoke with the tour group. Listening to them and observing their libraries, it was evident that they shared many

qualities which made them likable and effective library advocates and successful library operators:

- Infectious enthusiasm, even after many years in the role of director
- Absolute conviction about the value of libraries
- Great clarity of vision and a way with words - the ability to create compelling sound bites that linger in the minds of library decision-makers
- Ingenuity and political savvy
- A bias for action
- Love of innovation
- Preparedness to take risks, to have a go, to live with the occasional failure
- Incredible stamina

It was wonderful and inspirational to meet these people.

### **The group experience**

One of the best aspects of the tour was the group experience. The opportunity provided by the group for sharing of perceptions and reflections enhanced the value of the tour to each individual. It also means that there is more likely to be ongoing discussion and action. Most importantly, the group experience has strengthened the relationship between participants. The leadership of the Victorian public library network as a whole is stronger for it.

*The Great Libraries of the World Tour provided significant value and learning to me in many ways. I think I've taken in 3 years worth of knowledge in 3 weeks! Not only were the libraries and staff we met in each country inspiring, resourceful and innovative thinkers, so too were my fellow travelling companions. The discussions on planes, trains and buses were just as valuable as the tour stops. – Beck Henshall, Manager, Libraries and Learning, Frankston City Council*

*The Great Libraries of the World tour was not only inspirational, but provided an excellent opportunity to share ideas and build relationships with my Victorian*

*colleagues. It was also encouraging to see that libraries in all parts of the world experience similar challenges and are actively working to come up with new and innovative approaches to service delivery.* – Alix Massina, Corporate Governance and Reporting Manager, State Library of Victoria

## Next steps for tour participants

The Viclink Tour: Great Public Libraries of the World was a great adventure. The participants returned to Australia both invigorated and exhausted. The learning was enormous and will reverberate through the careers of participants and the library sector for many years to come. It covered relatively small and practical things, such as ideas for alternative floor coverings, attractive and user-friendly shelving systems, creative lighting systems and funky furniture, through to really big things, such as new approaches to customer service, innovations to help libraries work 'smarter' and more efficiently, strategies to ensure that public libraries remain engaging and relevant in a world that is very fast-changing, and the value placed on public libraries by key decision-makers.

Some of the learning will be immediately applied in the workplaces of participants. Other parts of the learning require further reflection and discussion. This will be ongoing in Victoria as participants in the tour step through a program to share their learning with colleagues locally, with the broader library community, with potential partners in other sectors, and with others concerned to deliver excellent library services to the Victorian community.

*I am grateful for the privilege of participating in the Great Libraries of the World Tour and for the generosity of my colleagues here and overseas. The many and varied learnings from the experience have broadened the context for my work in delivering services and programs to my community. I know that having participated in this tour will have real benefits for myself, my staff, my colleagues and most importantly for the communities that I work for. Ideas that I gathered from the tour and from my colleagues on the tour are already being incorporated into work practices and future planning for the Brimbank Libraries and Learning Department..* – Chris Kelly, Manager Libraries and Learning, Brimbank City Council



*... the tour was truly inspirational, and has left me brimming with ideas of how the Community and Education sectors can work more closely with Libraries in providing communities with a range of educational, cultural and recreational activities and programs that will further enhance community life ... thank you for letting me be part of such a wonderful experience! – Mandy Gatliff, Manager Family and Youth Services, Frankston City Council*

*Thank you to Viclink for providing me with such a wonderful opportunity to visit so many magnificent and inspirational libraries on the other side of the world and meet such enthusiastic fellow librarians from both Australia and overseas. My 'brief' fifteen minute presentation to the local council and CEO lasted 45 minutes. Even the councillors who are less supportive of our library service seemed inspired by the possibilities of what libraries can offer ... Even though all the libraries we visited are so much larger than my small country library service, I gained some valuable contacts, ideas, and photos to show what is possible. My challenge now is to find the resources and partnerships to help me turn my new dreams into reality and move our library into the future as an even better utilised and exciting facility for our community. – Camille Cullinan, Manager Cultural Development and Libraries, Swan Hill Rural City Council*

## Tour Itinerary

|                 |   |  |
|-----------------|---|--|
| 28 September    | Melbourne - Singapore   |  |
| 29-30 September | National Library of Singapore<br>Library @Esplanade<br>Bishan Library   | A research and public lending library<br>Dedicated to the performing arts<br>A new five level suburban branch library  |
| 1 October       | Singapore – Helsinki  |  |
| 2-3 October     | Sello Library<br>The Royal Library<br>Meetingpoint@lasipalatsi<br>Library 10                                  | A large new growth corridor library<br>Finland's National Library<br>For E-service access, training and trouble shooting<br>For music – listening, creating and performing |
| 4 October       | Helsinki – Stockholm  |  |
|                 | The Reading Room<br>The House of Comics   | Music, videos and news media for adults<br>Specialising in comics and graphic novels   |
| 5 October       | Asplund Library   | Stockholm's heritage listed main public library  |
| 6 October       | Kista Library<br>International Library<br>Youth Library<br>The Children's Room                                | Another growth corridor library<br>Specialising in languages other than Swedish<br>Modelling the way for working with teenagers<br>A library just for 0-11 year olds       |
| 7 October       | Stockholm – Copenhagen  |  |
| 8-10 October    | The Black Diamond<br>Vanlose Library<br>Conference: The Smart City<br>and its Libraries<br>Malmo City Library | Denmark's beautiful National Library<br>One of Copenhagen's newest branch libraries<br>Held in the Vanlose Culture House<br><br>A regional city masterpiece in Sweden      |
| 11 October      | Copenhagen – Amsterdam  |  |
| 12 October      | Rest day  |  |
| 13 October      | Amsterdam Public Library<br>DOK – Library Concept Center  | Europe's biggest public library, opened in 2007<br>A stunning supermarket conversion in Delft  |
| 14-15 October   | Amsterdam – Hong Kong   |  |
| 16 October      | Ma On Shan Public Library<br>City Hall Public Library<br>Central Hong Kong Public<br>Library                  | A large suburban branch library<br>Hong Kong's first public library – 50 years old<br>One of the largest public libraries in the world                                     |
| 17 October      | Hong Kong – Melbourne   |  |

## **Tour Participants**

### **From Victorian libraries**

Camille Cullinan, Manager Cultural Development and Libraries, Swan Hill Rural City Council

Rebecca Henshall, Manager Libraries and Learning, Frankston City Council

Chris Kelly, Manager Libraries and Learning, Brimbank City Council

Lynette Lewis, Co-ordinator On-line Services, Yarra Plenty Regional Library Service

Christine Mackenzie, Chief Executive Officer, Yarra Plenty Regional Library Service

Alix Massina, Corporate Governance and Reporting Manager, State Library of Victoria

John Murrell, Chief Executive Officer, West Gippsland Regional Library Corporation

Debra Rosenfeldt, Manager Public Libraries, State Library of Victoria

Karen Ward-Smith, Manager Library, Arts and Heritage, City of Greater Dandenong

### **Others**

Jane Cowell, Senior Consultant, *AECgroup*

Mandy Gatliff, Manager Family and Youth Services, Frankston City Council

Patricia Genat, Managing Director, ALS Library Services

Sharan Harvey, Manager, Brisbane City Council Library Services

Sharon Robertson, Coordinator Collection Services, Brisbane City Council Library Services

Geoff Stempel, Associate Director Public Library Services, State Library of South Australia