

# APLIS

Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services





## ***IS THIS THE BEST SMALLER CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY IN THE WORLD?***

The province of South Australia was officially settled by Europeans in 1836. If there was one overriding characteristic of the state which developed from that province, it was that it was a city-state, being likened in 1898 by British Fabian socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb to a German principality.

That characteristic prevails, and the contribution of its many German settlers is still in evidence. The state of wine and roses thus in 2010 has as its capital Adelaide, a city of 1.2 million sometimes pleasantly described as the largest country town in the world. It also has numerous smaller cities and towns of which the largest is, with a growing population of around 26,000 and now the 50<sup>th</sup> largest urban area in Australia, Mount Gambier. Some 450km south east of the capital and about the same distance from Melbourne, Mount Gambier, with its temperate climate and proximity to South Australia's Limestone Coast is a progressive sort of place whose council aspires to make it 'the most liveable city in Australia'. It was the birthplace of Sir Robert Helpmann, and among the other claims to fame of the city and its region are its dormant maar volcanoes, of which the largest holds the Blue Lake, a huge lake of high quality drinking water which changes colour with the seasons. It also has many caves and sinkholes which attract cave divers from around the world; proximity to Australia's premium wine region – also known worldwide – the Coonawarra; and is home to Australia's largest softwood industry.

Added to those distinctions can now be its new public library. This opened on 17 December 2009 to what can only be described as an overwhelming response from a community which from 1981 had access only to an almost invisible and increasingly congested library in the bowels of its adjacent civic centre. The new library is an outstanding outcome of cooperation, imagination, and persistence from a library manager (Cathryn Harris); a remarkably empathetic architect (Peter Moeck); an innovative team of artists and artisans; the builders; mayor Steve Perryman and the council's other elected members; and council officers led by CEO Greg Muller. It ticks all of the boxes required for a public library to truly be a community's Third Place, with its design a 'delight for the senses' and focused on four requirements

- colocation with other community facilities
- internal and external design to exceed national best practice and be bold and imaginative
- size and proportions to provide a long term library solution
- internal spaces to be flexible and provide discrete areas for the demographic range.

The handsome booklet provided at the opening of the library states that 'This new, bold iteration of the Mount Gambier Library has exceeded all that council expected, providing an even greater level of community engagement and opportunities to learn, connect and explore'. Indeed it does, with features which include

- a 60 metre 'lattice of letters' metal screen which follows the curve of the east elevation to the entrance
- a truly engaging cave themed children's library
- a 15 metre internal limestone well saw-cut to reveal underground geology, and carved with silhouettes of a forest
- timber surrounds on the columns supporting the skillion roof structure, incorporating poetry and phrases from writers that are relevant to the uses of the adjacent rooms
- the highly successful Bookmark Café
- a youth lounge with playstations, magazines, TVs and commissioned 'youth chairs'
- a relaxing reading area overlooking Mount Gambier's famous cave garden
- a local and family history area using handcrafted blackwood furniture



- state of the art technology, with 24 hour free wireless internet access
- a generous unenclosed covered terrace for the café, farmers markets, performances and functions.

There is a tendency in Australia to claim that a new development is the best in the southern hemisphere. The Mount Gambier library can certainly fairly claim that, and more. I doubt – and I have seen many over the years – if a better smaller city library building exists worldwide. If it does, its community is as fortunate as members of the Mount Gambier community, with their seven days a week Great Good Place to which they have responded in great numbers.

Such a library – with its overt commitment to reader and staff development and effective marketing – should be the *aspiration* for all of their communities by state/territory and local governments in both Australia and New Zealand. For *inspiration* they should beat a path to Mount Gambier to see just what can be achieved within a moderate budget.

Among the 200 or so descriptors applied to modern public libraries (for a list see [www.foia.org.au](http://www.foia.org.au)) are

- a city with a great library is a great city
- council shop windows
- key institutions of civil society
- living rooms of the city
- new village greens
- places of community connection
- signs of a well functioning government
- your tax dollars hard at work.

Mount Gambier now has a great library, but does that make it a great city? And is that library the best smaller city library in the world? The answer to both questions, I venture, is yes.

*Alan Bundy*  
Editor

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***The Mount Gambier Library Manager Cathryn Harris is happy to receive requests for the library's opening booklet while stocks last. Her email is [CHarris@mountgambier.sa.gov.au](mailto:CHarris@mountgambier.sa.gov.au)***