

Up, Up and Away!

The Way to a Super Suburban Library.

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This is the story of a journey to a modern library service for Karori - a suburb in the west of the city of Wellington and home to about 15,000 residents. The need for a better library has been recognised for many years, but the planning and financing of the building has been subject to a series of delays. The area has had a library since the 1840s when a community hall was built by settlers. The hall served as a place for public meetings, a night school and housed the district library. In 1920 the borough became part of the city and soon after this the library, which had a book stock of 2000 items for 84 members, was extended into the old Borough Council Chambers. By 1953 the pressure on space in the library was such that the Mobile Library was regularly sent to South Karori. A proposal for additional library facilities would be discussed frequently over the next few years, accompanied from time to time by complaints from the public, usually about lack of heating in the library. 'The loyalty of the library staff in this freezing chamber', as one newspaper correspondent phrased it, was rewarded when in late 1967, the Council announced that it was calling tenders for a new building. This most recent library was opened in 1969 and demolished in 2004! The building was about 340m² in area, one of the smallest in Wellington, while at the same time being one of the busiest. It housed a collection of 24,000 with a turnover rate of 8 issues per item. The new facility is a two-level building about three times the size of the original library and complete with café.

Getting started 2000

The library had long recognised the need for upgrading the facility not only to meet increasing business levels but also to address issues such as:

- An increased focus on technology
- Workflow and OSH issues
- Structural imperfections
- Poor match between form and function

but wider support for this was not forthcoming. What changed? A group of concerned citizens started developing a project that became known as 'The Heart of Karori Project'. It initially was concerned with community services, facilities and the aesthetics of the town centre. Their lobbying of the local Ward Councillors provided impetus and advocacy at the political table. Through the Annual Plan process funding was allocated to enable the library to undertake a feasibility study on the future of Karori Library.

Moving Forward

Feasibility Study

Initially our expectation was for an enhanced and extended library building, to bring it into line with the standard large library model of Wellington City, which at the time was about 600m². The assumptions were that we would be extending the existing building. But this was not to be. So what changed?

Library Trends

Waitakere, North Shore, Auckland as well as Christchurch City Libraries were visited to view recent building projects. It was largely as a result of this that we changed our assumptions and began thinking about a much larger and multi purpose facility by Wellington standards. We can not emphasise too much the value of visiting other libraries while being prepared to think well beyond your assumptions. Keep in mind that you are building for the future as well as the present. Drawing on international experience from literature and personal experience was also a key part of developing our ideas.

Community Consultation

A variety of consultation methods were employed, including a mail drop survey to all Karori residents, a children's competition to design and draw their 'dream' library, a series of focus groups, and the gathering of anecdotal evidence and comment from existing library customers.

Options

Taking the information gathered from the consultation and investigation, we prepared a number of options for presentation as part of a business case seeking funding in the 2001/2002 annual plan. There were several new concept options identified but with the new information our preferred option became a much larger, 2 level library including leased retail or office space. At this stage ballpark costs were identified by our quantity surveyors. Our experience has shown that it is really important to ensure escalation is built into project costings. While this sounds like an obvious suggestion, we would strongly recommend that you check that your organisation does routinely include escalation in its project costs.

Time for a Cuppa?

Nothing ever goes according to plan!

What do we mean? You think you have funding, the approval and you are starting to plan and then suddenly everything is put on hold and you are told that there's to be a wider project established to develop the Karori town centre and that you are to be a part of that. What does that mean? It means more consultation, another feasibility study and delay!

Council had taken the decision to investigate the ways in which the Karori Town Centre could be redeveloped and the options to combine council community facilities into one building. Better shopping, street works and community spaces became part of

the project brief. However, this rescope project now envisaged us in one of the options, sharing space with a supermarket. This is probably a scenario that only public libraries have to confront but it does again illustrate the value of considering development opportunities beyond the traditional or what might even seem initially possible.

What's Important? Don't let your requirements get lost in a bigger project – keep articulating what is important. Visibility, access, street frontage. Larger projects are probably managed by someone outside the library, maybe even an external project manager, and conveying what a modern library is and needs is critical in such a situation. At the same time there is the need to be flexible as we work with a different set of objectives. In our case one of the options had us on the second floor above a supermarket and in another – we were tucked behind a large Mobil petrol station.

If the objectives have changed then any consultation on the project needs to stress how it is different from previous consultation, otherwise there is the risk of the public misunderstanding and feeling over consulted. We received a lot of anecdotal comments to this effect. This consultation round identified issues largely external to the library – in particular, parking and street works, better supermarkets, a refurbished Mall and the relocation of the Mobil station. This seems to be an indication of the widespread community support for libraries and confirm our belief that as far as the public was concerned, there was never not going to be a new library.

The identification of options, the concept drawings, consultation with stakeholders, and Council approvals process took more than 18 months. We found that this was a necessary timeframe because of the complexity of the objectives and the fact that you only get one chance to get it right, however it did impact on the cost structure because in the intervening period the market was less favourable due to a large increase in building activity as well as the international demands for steel etc. Escalation built into the project budget would have helped mitigate these trends.

In the end we decided on a 2 level library on the existing site with café because it met most of our requirements for visibility, access etc. This decision however threw up some other questions for consideration. Obviously it adds to the operating costs because you need to duplicate staff and equipment. Another big question was how to split the collection. In the end we decided to place our main high use collections – adult fiction and the children's collection on the ground floor and the rest on the first. Time will prove us right or wrong! Some features of the design include internal access to the café, with customers able to bring their food and drink through. An external community space is shared with the café. The building is linked to the other community facilities by a themed walkway and landscaping as it was not possible to physically link the various buildings. Space is provided for the Local History Society's collections. Electronic marketing is planned using plasma screens and high quality projectors. The staffroom opens onto a deck.

The rest of the project involved refurbishing accommodation for the Community Centre (in that building behind the Mobil station!) and some landscaping and street works.

Green Light

Consultants.

We cannot stress too highly the value of an external project manager. We are librarians, not construction experts and we all have a myriad of tasks that make up our jobs. Cost? On average Consultant costs are typically between 5 and 10% of the total project cost. We went to the market for project management and architectural services rather than rely on Council resources. The tenders were assessed by a team of Council staff representing the various stakeholder units and required consensus.

Demolition, site clearance and construction.

One issue that had been identified in our original feasibility study was that the site had been part of an early burial ground during the late 1800s, when during the period prior to 1902 as many as 40 people may have been interred, although there were no records of who was buried there or in fact how many were buried there or for how long they were buried there. In 1935 during some street works outside the library six bodies were discovered at the road side. Under the Historic Places Act 1993, you must obtain authority from the Historic Places Trust prior to undertaking any work that may disturb an archaeological site. An archaeological site is defined in the Act as any place associated with pre-1900 human activity. As a result we were required to apply to the Historic Places Trust for an Archaeological Permit before excavation could begin. You should also be aware that the Historic Places Trust has up to three months to either approve or decline your application. If further information is required then a further period of up to three months is allowed for under the Act. Under the provisions of the permit an initial survey of the site was required and then obviously the contractors were required to stop work in the event of dislodging any human remains. In the event nothing was disturbed thereby avoiding a potentially significant further delay to the project.

The library construction has taken about nine months. The construction process can be subject to delay by such obvious things as the weather, but also by scarcity of subcontractors and the availability and condition of materials e.g. wet wood and steel shortages. Normal project management methodology stresses the importance of strict timeframes; however, we believe that this needs to be balanced against a good outcome for the community.

Fitout.

This area was one that we felt quite comfortable about retaining control over. Obviously we sought advice from the architects about the concepts, colour and general design of furniture, but we felt that as professionals in the field we knew what would work well for a library as well as being able to keep within a quite discreet budget. We also restricted ourselves to local suppliers, in spite of receiving approaches from a number of companies from around New Zealand.

Community contact

How have we kept in touch with the community throughout this process? We have placed the plans and a photographic record of the project on the Karori Page of the website. We have also kept this information in CD format as a permanent record. We

have also been displaying this information in the temporary library. Regular meetings are held with a Community Reference Group to keep them up-to-date and seek input. Occasional project newsletters have been sent to all residents and of course the staff has kept customers up to date.

Record keeping.

For audit purposes a full printed trail is required – don't plan to rely solely on the electronic versions of documents. Emails that show how a decision was reached are also important and should be printed off. Also, consider as we have, donating a comprehensive record of the project to your local historical society.

Conclusion.

We'd like to thank Shand Shelton, our project managers for making everything happen. Thanks too to our architects, Warren and Mahoney, for designing a super suburban library in a challenging space. Please come visit us once we open in November!