

review / CAMERON LOGAN

Green Square Library and Plaza, Sydney

Stewart Hollenstein in association with Stewart Architects

INTERSTICES 20

The enveloping influence of Covid-19 in the early part of 2020 has rendered attempts to describe tendencies in public architecture, for the time being, somewhat pointless. Who can say where we are headed? Yet, prior to the shutdown of public gathering places around the world in February and March 2020, nothing seemed clearer in the domain of architectural production than the continued rise of the municipal library as a key site for architectural production and fostering shared resources. Both where I am in Sydney, and in a range of other places around the world, new libraries have been widely awarded, discussed, and embraced over the past decade. This renewed interest in public libraries has been a feature not just of architectural discourse, but also wider public discussions about the meaning and provision of public places. Against a background of continuing privatisation of government-owned assets in Australia, the example of the public library seemed to offer a sliver of evidence that governments have some ongoing appetite for funding genuinely public places. Moreover, unlike in other domains, such as the stadium and sporting arena, or schools and universities—where generic, programmatic considerations and specialised consultants have dramatically narrowed the possibilities for architecture—the creative architectural (and urban) designer seems to be exercising meaningful influence in the planning and delivery of libraries.

Internationally there were a number of harbingers of the current library moment going back to the early years of this century. Bibliotheca Alexandrina (1989-2001), or the new Alexandrian Library by Snøhetta, and OMA's Seattle Central Library (1999-2004)—designed in association with Seattle's LMN—were two of the most prominent. In the past couple of years, libraries have been among the most prominent projects in international architectural awards. LocHal Library (2019) in Tilburg (The Netherlands) by Civic Architects, an adaptation of a vast 1930s locomotive shed, was the winner of the World Architecture Festival building of the year in 2019. Meanwhile the Hunters' Point Library (2019) in Queens, New York, by Steve Holz Architecture, created such a stir in that city and encouraged such high levels of visitation last year that it became almost unmanageable for the librarians.

Local governments and local architects have also provided Sydney with a slew of architecturally distinguished new libraries in this century. The City of Sydney,

the biggest and wealthiest Local Government Area (LGA) in metropolitan Sydney, has been the most active. In 2006, with architects Lacoste & Stevenson, the city completed an adaptation of the colonial-era Customs House Building at Circular Quay for use as a library and visitor centre. A few years later, they opened the Surry Hills Library and Neighbourhood Centre (2009), designed by FJMT. That firm was also the architect of a major new project for a local government in Sydney's southwest, which adapted an existing council office building for use as the Bankstown Library and Knowledge Centre (2014), and a much-awarded conservation and adaptive reuse project for the Historic Houses Trust (now Sydney Living Museums), that included the museum's Caroline Simpson Library (2004).

As with the international scene, the past couple of years in Sydney have also seen continuing and architecturally stimulating activity connected with library projects. The City of Sydney opened its Darling Square Library, designed by BVN in October 2019, just a few months after another BVN-designed facility, Marrickville Library and Pavilion (for the neighbouring Inner West Council) opened to wide acclaim from locals and the profession.



Fig. 1 Julien Lanoo. Looking east over Green Square Library and Plaza [Photograph]

But the new Sydney library that has arguably attracted the widest attention and most acclaim in recent years is Green Square Library and Plaza (Stewart Hollenstein, 2018). The result of a 2012 international design competition, the library and plaza are the civic centrepiece of the massive Green Square urban renewal project on former industrial land in Sydney's inner south. The new mixed-use neighbourhood involves \$AU 13 billion worth of planned construction and over 30,000 new residential units. The library and plaza precinct, which will ultimately also include the Gunyama Park and Aquatic Centre, is connected directly to the Green Square train station and adjacent to the most easily recognisable tower in the urban renewal project, the Infinity commercial development. As such the library occupies a strategically significant position and carries a lot of responsibility for the success of the area as something more than a densely packed dormitory.

The library and plaza are integrally connected and much of the programme of the library itself is tucked below. The architects conceived the scheme as a set of children's blocks scattered across the plaza. But just two main elements rise above the ground plane. One is a modestly scaled, six-storey, prismatic tower containing bookable community spaces, including a recital room with sprung

floor, a computer lab, flexible meeting room, and a small reading room. The other is the wedge-shaped entrance and café at the busy Botany Road end of the site. While below the plaza, the main library space—including children’s area, and all of the books, magazines, and other resources—is generously daylighted by a central circular lightwell and garden. This space is zoned but entirely flexible, with a continuous service grid enabling complete reconfiguration as needs change.

The pair of crisp geometric objects carefully counterposed against the circular lightwell cut into the plaza is the most photogenic aspect of the project. But the real significance of this library-plaza is in the work it does as a piece of urban design. The building has several access points, all of them leading into the library proper. This is unusual as most libraries, in fact most public facilities,

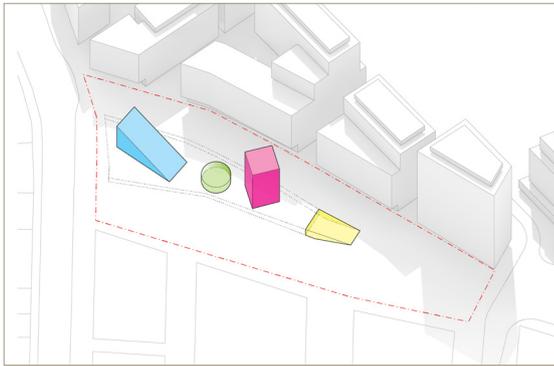


Fig. 2 Hollenstein Stewart in association with Steward Architects. Green Square Library and Plaza proposal [Volumetric diagram]

Fig. 3 Tom Roe. Amphitheatre and stair to the eastern entrance of the library [Photograph]



rely on a single entrance/exit to maintain easy active surveillance from a fixed point. Frequently, architectural intentions to use a new building to orchestrate a series of intersections and connections to surrounding urban space are actually undermined by client preferences for such single-point access control. Here, in contrast, the architects have been able to persuade the librarians to work with multiple access points and so enable the set of surrounding connections on which the basic design concept depends.

The full implications of the permeable library facility for Green Square are not yet evident—or they weren’t before it closed in March—as the eastern end of the plaza is still dominated by construction sites. (The library was deliberately developed early in the scheme to provide some sense of community and civic belonging). But once development of the surrounding blocks is complete and the swimming pool and recreation centre to the south are operating, the library promises to become a heart for the new neighbourhood.

The library was busy upon opening and is a much needed and already highly valued place in this rapidly growing part of Sydney. If there is a question that remains about the ultimate success of the project, however, it is whether the building provides sufficient refuge for the users who need or desire quiet and secluded reading and study space. An earlier wave of library building in Sydney included Col Madigan’s Dee Why Library (Edwards, Madigan Torzillo, and Partners, 1966). That outstanding public building is conceived as an acropolis, rather than a crossroads, and it is much more internal in character, a true refuge lit from above



Fig. 4 Tom Roe. Story-time circle showing bench seating and toy storage units [Photograph]

and walled off from the surrounding suburban environment. The Green Square Library arguably lacks that quality; or provides it in very small doses.

Green Square, like the Surry Hills Library (2009), takes its cues from a very different precedent, the contemporary café. Cafés in Sydney typically engage the street as much as possible and minimise barriers between inside and out. The wedge-shaped café that is part of the Green Square Library is an exemplary instance, separated from outside by the most transparent glazed skin. In fact, it was conceived by the architects as part of the plaza and its outdoor lighting conditions are arguably a bit too bright. The stair down to the main library space provides an extra layer of separation from street and plaza, but the plan as a whole is something of a thoroughfare. The furnishing and nooks, as good as they are—and the joinery in this project is very beautiful—have a lot of work to do.

Libraries today are expected to do more and more different things while maintaining their traditional functions. They lend DVDs, tools, and video game consoles in addition to books; they are used as cafés and host community groups and small musical events as well as children’s story time. Obviously, they cannot be all things to all people. Green Square Library and Plaza does many of these very well. It is a highly successful public meeting place and children’s play space, and contains an important set of resources for local residents. If it also proves to be a sustaining refuge for readers and students, then the architects will have achieved something quite extraordinary.

Fig. 5 Julien Lanoo. Wedge-shaped library entrance and cafe [Photograph]

