

## Reading Room Services – Report on Focus Groups December 2007

### Introduction

The National Library held three focus groups in early November 2007 to obtain feedback from readers on existing reading room services and gauge initial reaction to potential reading room changes.

There were 32 participants in total, representing a broad spectrum of ages and experience using the National Library's reading rooms. Users of the Petherick and Newspapers and Microforms reading rooms had the greatest representation, although most people indicated they use multiple reading rooms. The focus groups ran for an hour and a half, during which discussion focussed on the physical environment. For a list of the questions posed to the groups, see the Appendix.

The participants provided us with numerous insights into aspects of the building and the way services are offered onsite. Here is a summary of their comments, grouped by theme.

### Ambience

There were many positive comments about the general atmosphere in the Library. People value the comfortable and welcoming ambience in the building, and place a high premium on access to lake views and natural light. They find all parts of the building a pleasant environment in which to work, with the notable exception of the Newspapers and Microforms Reading Room.

- ◆ The library is a second home – other people go to the beach on the weekend but 'this is my beach'. It is a clean and positive space.
- ◆ I love the high ceilings and the natural light. It is a comfortable and pleasant environment and I don't feel shut in. The Main Reading Room is conducive to working and encourages one to stay
- ◆ Nice atmosphere – love the floral arrangement as you enter the MRR, art works are very welcoming and part of a stimulating environment
- ◆ Sense that this is a national space that has 'gravitas', 'grandeur'
- ◆ An awesome place but it will also take you as you come – fond memories of coming here as a student and spending as much time in the café as in the reading rooms
- ◆ NLA is not just National library but also Canberra's most significant public library
- ◆ Newspapers Reading Room is too gloomy, stuffy and crowded – all machines often in use
- ◆ Need to be careful that NLA does not try to compensate for lack of resourcing in universities

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### Zones for different kinds of use

The idea of creating zones for different types of use was well received. The groups agreed that noise levels, access to group study space, and access to genealogical resources, were all things that could be addressed by designating zones.

- ◆ Noise is a real problem in all reading rooms. Digital cameras are too noisy and small groups that need to talk have nowhere to go.
- ◆ Family historians need a zone because they like to talk to each other about what they are doing.
- ◆ I'd like a small room dedicated to group work – seating for about eight people with a computer would be great
- ◆ Reference collection is wasted space, gigantic, moribund – people hardly use it anymore
- ◆ Positioning of staff in MRR and in the foyer is too out of the way and a hindrance to visitors – could the service desk be moved into the middle of MRR?
- ◆ Coming into MRR and being confronted by a bank of computers and a service desk off to the side is not ideal
- ◆ We need adequate space to read, write and type
- ◆ We need a large area where people can talk, work together and bring in their own equipment – people should have the opportunity to do things in their own way
- ◆ Need an area where you can eat or drink while you are working
- ◆ A 'zone' for computers that allows some talking would be good
- ◆ People also need a quiet, individual space where they can enjoy using the collection
- ◆ It would be good to have a space where you can use different media and various formats together
- ◆ Need to be able to use physical items and internet at the same time
- ◆ Zones are a good idea but will need physical barriers between them to segregate different activities
- ◆ Some libraries have TV sets – maybe have news programs on down in newspapers?

### Special collections 'zone'

There were mixed reactions to the concept of a special collections 'zone'. Participants recognise deficiencies in the current set-up and can see benefits to being able to use a variety of materials concurrently, but are cautious about the implications on the high level of service and access to expertise they currently experience in the special collections reading rooms.

- ◆ Would be great to access different formats at once, but don't want to compromise on staff availability and expertise

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- ◆ I don't mind moving between reading rooms – material is very different (Asian, MS, PRR) and I don't need to look at it all at once. I organise my time around visiting different reading rooms
  - ◆ Combining reading rooms would make NLA like other libraries and the reader would become more anonymous
  - ◆ I like having reading rooms that focus on the collection – makes them “special”
  - ◆ From a disability perspective, it can be hard to move around the different reading rooms and population is aging – but would rather do that than lose special relationships or knowledge of library staff
  - ◆ It takes time to figure out where everything is around the building
  - ◆ Special collections aren't for browsing – can't really broaden the readership
  - ◆ Special collections are used in different ways – hard to treat uniformly and would hate to see a change in atmosphere. For example, pictures and maps need large spaces, discussion happens in Pictures reading room whereas Manuscripts needs quiet
  - ◆ The catalogue doesn't indicate that there are “special areas” – doesn't really relate to how things are physically organised in the building
  - ◆ Don't like huge reading rooms
  - ◆ Participants mentioned that the following combinations of material would be useful to use concurrently:
    - general collections and manuscripts
    - maps and general collections
    - government publications and reference materials
    - music and manuscripts

### Petherick Reading Room

In the discussions about the creation of a special collections zone, there were a number of comments made about the Petherick Reading Room. There seems to be some confusion about who can access it and for what purpose, particularly from non-Petherick readers.

- ◆ I appreciate the quietness of Petherick
- ◆ Petherick is a mystery to me – who can use it?
- ◆ You see people wandering into Petherick, not sure if they are allowed.
- ◆ I feel sorry for the people who are shepherded out – signage is inadequate in keeping them out in the first place – was easier when PRR was located separately from MRR
- ◆ High level of service – we are ‘spoon-fed’

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- ◆ Noise can be a real problem in Petherick – no place to discuss things, digital cameras can be very distracting
  - ◆ Some people view membership as a right
  - ◆ Please keep the Petherick Reading Room

#### Opening hours

All sessions made the point that they view the Library's opening hours as inadequate. Having longer access to the collections through a centralised special collections reading room was seen as a clear advantage.

- ◆ Moving microfilm up to MRR at 5pm is a real hassle
- ◆ Closing the NMRR in the evenings has excluded a large section of people. Genealogists need access to the self-service microforms and the other tools – moving upstairs just doesn't work
- ◆ Moving from Manuscripts to Petherick at 5pm is a minor inconvenience
- ◆ It is frustrating that I can't come in 24 hours/day
- ◆ Young people work at all hours
- ◆ I would like to be able to get access to the Library at 7am
- ◆ Access to special collections is especially restricted – why not weekends?

#### Accessibility of the collection

There were very positive comments about the levels of accessibility to the collection, contrasting the willingness to facilitate access to the collection at the NLA with an attitude of 'protecting the collection' at all costs at other institutions.

- ◆ Access to the NLA collections is what is keeping me in Canberra
- ◆ Materials arrive quickly and people will bend over backwards to fix problems. There isn't a sense like in other libraries that "you are lucky to be here/get this"
- ◆ Delivery of material is excellent, e-call-slips are wonderful, but you should be able to scan as readily as photocopy materials
- ◆ I like photocopiers that are simple, easy to use and scattered around - don't want to see a centralised copying area
- ◆ Need access to scanning facilities and a place to use digital cameras with adequate space
- ◆ From a student perspective, you know that books are going to be here unlike at university libraries. It is great to be able to call up material from the stacks from home.
- ◆ Wonderful to be able to browse the stacks in Asian collections – I like the sense of being trusted

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- ◆ I value open access to government publications in the Controlled Access Collection – ability to browse shelves is very important - and would like to have access to a photocopier when down there
  - ◆ Love the journal display and the ‘new books’ – both could be expanded – great way to pick up ideas about books to read and what is coming into the collection

### Staff

The importance placed on access to service-oriented staff that are knowledgeable about the collections came across strongly. This is seen as a key component of the Library’s success.

- ◆ People still want face to face contact and expertise – wonderful knowledge of the collections
- ◆ You have a feeling from the staff that “we like you coming here and your work is important”.

### Treasures Gallery

Participants liked the idea of a ‘Treasures’ gallery, but emphasised the importance keeping the identity of “library”. Some people expressed concern that the gallery would take space from the ground floor reading rooms.

- ◆ A wonderful idea but must still give the feeling that this is a library
- ◆ We need a children’s component to the Treasures Gallery
- ◆ Be careful you don’t become a museum and don’t do away with the rotating exhibitions
- ◆ We could do more cross-pollination with the other cultural institutions like National Gallery of Australia and the Portrait Gallery
- ◆ Existing displays are very static – could do with dynamic displays of key materials like Australian War Memorial
- ◆ Existing gallery is too dark – people might look at exhibit cases along corridor into MRR if they were more interactive/engaging and not so dark
- ◆ Could have a meeting area inside the Treasures Gallery where people could discuss things

### Foyer

When asked about how the NLA could make its special collections more visible, the participants made a number of comments about the foyer. Responses indicate that our existing signage could be improved and that visitors unfamiliar with the Library find it difficult to navigate.

- ◆ Could use the TV in the foyer to better advantage or have some interactive terminals to explain things, like the NGA – how about an interactive map?
- ◆ Need more graphic representations - something funky, colourful – an area that is a ‘foretaste’ of the Library providing a sample of the collections would be good [*Aside – I suppose this is what the Treasures Gallery is intended to be?*]

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- ◆ I often see people wandering aimlessly in the foyer – the space is intimidating to the visitor. People come in and feel lost – they should know exactly what to do
  - ◆ Signage is inadequate around the building and should be positive rather than negative – ‘you are welcome to speak on the lounges outside the reading room’. We need signs in the lifts highlighting what is on each floor.
  - ◆ It would be great to have a large mural in the foyer with visual images of the various reading rooms rather than just signs
  - ◆ Foyer could be better used for functions/performances if the entrance were shifted – at present, it is large hallway – perhaps have more than one entrance?
  - ◆ Delightful to see young mums and prams - NLA is catering for a group that you wouldn't see in any other National Library

#### Amenities

There were a number of comments about Bookplate and the demise of the staff cafeteria in the Brindabella room. Regular users lamented that there was nowhere to go and get a quick, inexpensive coffee without having to compete with the line-ups of visitors in Bookplate.

- ◆ Views in the Brindabella room are wasted
- ◆ I miss the staff canteen – we need a cheap, quick place to eat
- ◆ Bookplate restaurant is nice but it set up for visitors, not regulars

#### Other comments

There were a number of other comments made during the sessions that are useful things to note. These include:

- ◆ MRR needs to be rewired and needs more powerpoints – lots of extension cords around
- ◆ The website could be better used to differentiate and promote the special collections
- ◆ The use of lighting could be improved around the building – “more lamps in Asian Collections”, “less fluorescent lights”. Lighting can make a big room seem cosy and having individual lights can also save energy
- ◆ The desks in Manuscripts were built before laptops – need better workspace
- ◆ Harold White Fellows a terrific idea – would it be possible to offer scholarships to schools as a way of promoting the special collections
- ◆ Theatre has poor acoustics – it would be great to have a concert/public performance space

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## **Conclusion**

It has been beneficial to hear what readers like about our current services and to receive some helpful suggestions for improvement. It has been a useful exercise that has provided the Library with ideas and insights to take into account as we plan for the future.

The Library is keen to hear any additional comments that any of our readers may have on the building and/or the services we offer onsite. If you would like to share your thoughts with us, please do not hesitate to contact Aileen Weir, Manager (Service Development) at [comments@nla.gov.au](mailto:comments@nla.gov.au) or by posting your comment on our blog at <http://natlibaustralia.blogspot.com/>.

Thank you for your interest in the National Library of Australia.

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## Appendix – Questions posed at the Focus Groups

1. The National Library building means different things to different people.
  - a. What is it that makes the National Library 'special' for you?
  - b. What is it that entices you to the building? [distinguishes it from other libraries]
  
2. What characteristics about the existing reading rooms do you value most highly?
  
3. Are there specific changes that we could make that would enhance your experience of using the reading rooms?
  
4. An article by an American architect, Geoffrey Freeman, who specialises in library design says that no single, ideal example of the perfect library exists. Some libraries group certain activities around the building into different zones (e.g. group work areas, quiet study areas, multimedia areas, family history, etc).
  - a. Would you like to see a similar concept used in the National Library's public spaces?
  - b. If so, what kind of zones do you think you would create?
  
5. Michael Keller, University Librarian at Stanford University, observed recently that the special collections of the major US research libraries have become their primary concern – the archives, manuscripts, pictures, music and rare materials that are not held anywhere else.
  - a. How do you think we could place more emphasis on special collections in the way we design the building?
  - b. For example, would you like to see a special collections 'zone' – to be able to access manuscripts, pictures, music and original materials in one place without having to move around the building?
  
6. In summary, are there any points you would like to make about the reading rooms and the services provided through them that have not been covered by our discussions today?