



## WHAT MAKES A LIBRARY BUILDING SUCCESSFUL?

Russell Doust delves into the histories of public library buildings in Chicago, San Francisco and New York

In September 2005, I was in Chicago. Although I am a former librarian, I do not make a habit of visiting libraries around the world, but I did pay a brief visit to the Harold Washington Library Center, the headquarters of the Chicago public library system. This building, named after Chicago's first black mayor, occupies a whole city block and Chicagoans like to call it the largest public library building in the world. Actually, it is not, according to Godfrey Oswald's *Library World Records* (2004): the Chicago building's 756 640 square feet (230 624 square metres) is eclipsed by the 902 300 square feet (275 021 square metres) of the public library in Shanghai.

When I returned home, I thought it would be interesting to find out more about library buildings in the United States, and where better to start my research than in the collections of the National Library of Australia. From what was obviously going to be a wealth of material, I soon realised that there was more on public libraries than I could digest. In the end, I settled on the Chicago library and two other libraries which I had visited, the New York Public Library and

the San Francisco Public Library.

I have taken the term 'public library' to mean a library which lends some, if not all, of its collections directly to the ordinary general public. Chicago, San Francisco and New York all meet this definition, but the National Library of Australia, the State Library of New South Wales and the British Library in London do not, because they are generally not lending libraries.

Let's start with the oldest, the New York Public Library. In 1848, John Jacob Astor, said to be the richest American of his time (he made his money from real estate), left US\$400 000 to establish the first privately endowed free public reference library in the United States; the public lending branches followed. Phyllis Dain's *The New York Public Library: A Universe of Knowledge* (2000) tells and illustrates the story both in words and in fine images, and an earlier publication *Sixteen Million Books: The New York Public Library in 1935* (1936) commented that:

The great, gray landmark on Fifth Avenue [and] the Branch Libraries ... are generators of social and economic forces which brighten many homes and turn many wheels.

The sixteen million books, by the way, were not the total bookstock, but rather 'a counted total of 16 560 708 books ...

above left:  
Don Pollard  
One of the lions outside the Humanities and Social Sciences Library, The New York Public Library  
Courtesy New York Public Library

above right:  
Peter Aaron/Esto  
The Humanities and Social Sciences Library, The New York Public Library, Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street  
Courtesy New York Public Library



above left:  
Michael Allen Jones  
The entrance atrium of the San Francisco Public Library  
Courtesy San Francisco Public Library

above right:  
Michael Allen Jones  
The San Francisco Public Library  
Courtesy San Francisco Public Library



used by readers in the Library last year'; the total in the reference library at that stage was recorded as 2 411 600 volumes. The New York Public Library's 2005 Fact Sheet records a total of more than 43 million items (obviously not all of them books) in the research libraries. The building is on a site leased from the City, which importantly accepted responsibility for the building and its maintenance. Designed by architects John Mervyn Carrère and Thomas Hastings, both graduates of the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, it was formally opened in 1911, costing US\$9 million, \$2 million more than the new Library of Congress. Understandingly, it was a Beaux-Arts masterpiece, clad in Vermont marble and embellished with 'carved ceilings and tables, intricately worked bronze chandeliers and lampposts and doors, marble floors and doorways, decorative water fountains, and ornate door handles'. The marble lions, which flank the entrance, have been referred to as the city's most lovable public sculptures. The third floor had a quarter-acre main reading room, with a ceiling almost 52 feet (15.8 metres) high and seating for more than 700 users. It is hard to think of a more beautifully adorned library building and one which still serves its purpose admirably, although increasing use and the growth of the collections have made decentralisation into other buildings a necessity. But the New York Public Library only qualifies as a public library because it has a network of 85 local lending libraries throughout the city with over seven million items for loan to the public.

The San Francisco Public Library, on the other hand, did not fare so well. Its genesis was a citizens' proclamation of August 1877:

Whereas, We, the citizens of San Francisco, here assembled, believe that the dissemination of education among people is the only safeguard to republican liberty and government and believing the establishment of public libraries to be the best and cheapest means of education the people therefore, Resolved, That we do most heartily approve of the project about to be inaugurated for the establishment of A Free Library in this City and do pledge to the same our hearty and united support.

The proclamation is quoted in *A Free Library for This City* by Peter Booth Wiley (1996). This work, handsomely illustrated, tells the story of how the library opened in shared premises in 1879 and moved three times until funds, given by Andrew Carnegie in 1901 and supplemented by City money, finally resulted in a new purpose designed library which was opened in 1917. Perhaps it was fortunate that the building took so long, since the earthquake and subsequent fire in 1906 destroyed the library's main building and its collection. By 1943, the main library had reached its capacity. A drawn-out campaign for a new library ensued, but a combination of shortage of funds and a disinclination of the City authorities to proceed led to delay after delay until the new library, which finally cost in excess of US\$109 million, was completed in 1996. It is cleverly integrated into the Old Main library, which had been partly damaged in

the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. The new building has been designed to withstand an 8.3 Richter scale earthquake. Wiley quotes Marjorie Stern, a leader of the campaign to build the New Main, as commenting:

We have built the New Main, but we still have not built a world-class library ... the library remains a work in progress, a library of many visions that only over time and if properly supported, will cohere into a world-class library.

Here again we find a library which, like the New York Public Library and Chicago's Harold Washington Library Center, is a city-wide lending library service, underpinned by a significant not-for-loan reference library, although not one quite of the international stature of the New York Public Library.

Now, back to the library in Chicago. While San Francisco's public library had its baptism with earthquake, Chicago's had its baptism with fire. The fine new city on Lake Michigan, which grew up after the fire of 1871, became world famous for the quality of its architecture. It was almost inevitable that its new library building would be an important architectural adornment to a part of the city which by the late 1980s was undergoing a phase of urban renewal. Chicago had long had a fine Italianate central library (now preserved as an arts centre), but the central city library had outgrown that building. An article by Art Plotnik in *American Libraries* (July/August 1988) records that:

After some 66 years of political dickering, a mountain of planning, and a 1987–88 design-build competition ... Chicago has chosen a classical design by post-modernist architect Thomas H. Beeby.

Witold Rybczynski, writing in *The Atlantic* (August 1992) under the title 'A Good Public Building', comments:

Some library! [It] is the largest municipal library in the country ... The \$144 million, 756 000-square-foot building occupies a full city block on State Street in the South Loop [region of the city].

Not everyone shared his view that it was a good building. There was predictable aversion to a building which was almost aggressively old-fashioned, and this indeed in a city where the avant-garde seemed the norm. And the sheer immensity of the

Library, while catering to the apparent Chicago feeling that if it is the biggest it must be the best, did not necessarily mean that it worked well in practice. Like the New York Public Library's lions, the Chicago library has its own icons—five steel sculptures of owls at roof level.

It is fair enough, I think, to say that a successful library building must make a statement, lest it be overlooked and ignored. Many library buildings do make statements—I recall Minneapolis, Boston, and countless smaller examples in Australia, the United Kingdom and Europe, but Chicago certainly makes its statement on the grandest scale. The current Mayor of Chicago, Richard Daley, is reported as saying 'A library is an innovator and should play an integral and active role in every community'. Certainly, the three examples which I have examined meet these criteria. Experience suggests that buildings do matter. A great, even a good, building helps to entice people to use its services and its contents. In Australia, we are fortunate that we have many good library buildings; regrettably, lack of recurrent funding means, too often, that their true potential is not always achieved.

RUSSELL DOUST is a former State Librarian of New South Wales who was closely involved in the design and construction of the new (1988) Macquarie Street building of that library

Phil Moloitis  
The south-east exterior view of the Harold Washington Library Center, Chicago  
Courtesy Chicago Public Library

