

CREATIVE COMMUNITIES

The cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries

Summary report



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The logo for Project Sisu, featuring the words "project" and "sisu" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. "project" is in a light blue color, and "sisu" is in a darker blue color. A small blue bird-like icon is positioned above the letter "i" in "sisu".

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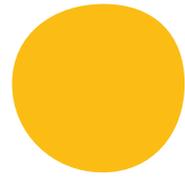
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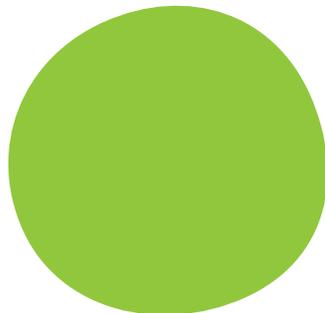
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OVERVIEW

This is a summary report of *Creative communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries*. The report sheds light on the cultural benefits that Victorian public libraries deliver in their communities. This study reveals that Victoria's public libraries are dynamic, vibrant contributors to cultural life and welcoming, innovative spaces for communities to connect.

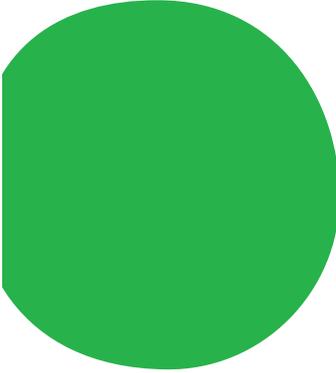
Today's public libraries go beyond their traditional offering of reading, literary and literacy activities. They are places where you might see a talk, exhibition or performance; create art, music or craft; or learn new ideas and skills. The library has become a place that actively fosters and showcases creativity, while also providing access to knowledge, ideas and discussion. These wide ranging activities bring varied ages and backgrounds together in the one place, creating a key public destination for diverse groups to meet.

Library activities are cultural in both senses of the word: cultural in that they animate community life, and cultural in their dedication to the arts, books and ideas. Victorian public libraries are culture-makers and cultural-connectors – they spark creativity, inspiration, social understanding and interaction.

This report is an initiative of the State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network, complementing two previous landmark research reports: *Libraries Building Communities* (2005) and *Dollars, Sense and Public Libraries* (2011). The full reports are available at www.plvn.net.au (Publications and Research).

'Victoria's public libraries are dynamic, vibrant contributors to cultural life and welcoming, innovative spaces for communities to connect'





ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This study is informed by quantitative data, extensive community consultation and case studies from public libraries across Victoria. Insights were gathered from a range of stakeholders of varied ages, locations and backgrounds, including library users and staff, arts professionals and cultural thinkers.

The field research took place in 2013 and data was gathered in the following ways:

- three online surveys of library staff and users (over 3000 responses)
- 14 workshops with library staff, users and government stakeholders
- 27 interviews with library staff, arts professionals, councillors and community representatives
- 10 small group discussions with library users
- a roundtable discussion with cultural thinkers, arts and library professionals
- a literature review of international library research, cultural studies, cultural economics and urban studies.

All of the research activities attracted strong participation and engagement. Participants openly shared their impressions, preferences and insights about public libraries.

SNAPSHOT: VICTORIA'S PUBLIC LIBRARIES

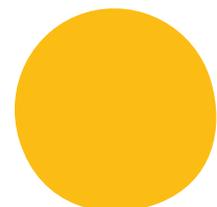
Libraries

- \$200m spent on public library service delivery
- 47 municipal public library services
- 253 static public library service points
- 27 mobile public libraries, visiting 305 different sites

Users

- 2.5m members of public libraries
- 27m visits to public libraries by customers
- 12m virtual visits via public library websites
- 1.3m attendees at public library programs

Acknowledgement: Data collected from the Victorian Public Library Annual Statistical Survey 2012-13.





THE CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The research identified six lenses through which the cultural benefits of public libraries can be viewed. These benefits apply to all of Victoria's public library services – big and small, urban and regional. The following descriptions are high level. More detailed descriptions, many more case studies and deep supporting data can be found in the full *Creative communities* report.

Lens 1: Libraries as public places of cultural meaning and significance

Lens 2: The culture of library spaces

Lens 3: Libraries incubating creativity

Lens 4: Libraries as cultural connectors

Lens 5: Libraries supporting Australia's complex cultural mosaic

Lens 6: Libraries nurturing the culture of the written and spoken word

LIBRARIES AS PUBLIC PLACES OF CULTURAL MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE

What the study revealed

The library is an important shared public destination. It is welcoming, open, useful and highly valued by the community, who have a sense of pride and ownership in the library.

Victorian public libraries are seen as safe, culturally meaningful places that are free and open to everyone. Public libraries interact with a broad cross-section of people and hold collections in key public buildings, which often become cultural touchstones for local communities. In a number of places across Victoria, new or expanded libraries have become the nucleus for building cultural precincts.



CASE STUDIES

Sir John Gorton Library, Kerang

The Sir John Gorton Library is Kerang's 'new' public library. It opened in 2003 with facilities including community meeting rooms, a community gallery and a genealogy research room. Its success as a cultural hub has encouraged local council to opt for a broad culture-oriented strategy to manage the cycle of decline in Kerang and keep the town vibrant and relevant to its citizens. The library is to become part of a bigger cultural precinct building enterprise. Gannawarra's Executive Manager for Community Wellbeing, Mandy Hutchinson explains, 'We believe that a healthy community is important to the sustainability of our community, and the creative precinct is critical.'

St Arnaud Library

The St Arnaud Friends of the Library group successfully fought a proposal to move their library away from the heart of town, keeping it in a central location. An attractive, well-sited library and exhibition space was eventually built adjacent to the council chambers. The Friends group has also raised funds by selling culled library books and producing art shows and book fairs to purchase art works and reference materials for the new library. 'Our library needed to be welcoming and accessible,' said Richard Bazeley from the Friends of the Library. 'It's the centre of cultural life in the town [and] a connector for all the things in the community that don't have to do with sport.'

THE CULTURE OF LIBRARY SPACES

What the study revealed

Library spaces are innovative and encourage people to experiment and discover, whether they are reading, listening, watching, working, dreaming, making or wandering.

Victorian public libraries are seen as comfortable, contemporary and resource-rich spaces. They are perceived as welcoming psychological spaces and described as safe, calm, enjoyable havens. Library spaces are also seen as creative spaces, associated with curiosity, wonder and discovery. The design of the library space is integral - well-designed, aesthetically pleasing spaces make for a better user experience and foster cultural immersion.



Melbourne City Library

Melbourne's City Library in Flinders Lane is one of the busiest libraries in Australia, with around 100,000 visitors each month. The library space includes meeting rooms, study and lounge areas, magazine-browsing enclaves, multimedia and music carrels, reference hubs, and a performance and exhibition space. The exhibition space is available to artists and performers who may otherwise struggle to get access to a city space, helping emerging artists gain exposure and established artists take their creative ideas in new directions.

Echuca Library

The new Echuca Library opened in August 2012. It is spacious and inviting with stunning views - it looks out on the historic Port of Echuca and Murray River Aquatic Reserve. Since opening, visitor numbers have soared and community participation in cultural events has continued to rise. The shire's mayor explains, 'The Shire of Campaspe opted for clever and thoughtful design, while remaining within a conservative budget.' Library users say the library is 'fantastic' and offers the kind of space that is highly valued in regional communities.

LIBRARIES INCUBATING CREATIVITY

What the study revealed

The library is a place to have creative experiences and make things – it facilitates, supports and showcases creative activities, from music and theatre to arts and poetry.

Libraries currently incubate community creativity in many ways. They facilitate expression and imaginative thinking. Victorian libraries host thousands of creative endeavours each year, including workshops and classes, exhibitions, theatre, music and poetry performances, installations and lectures. In fact, 20% of those surveyed said they used the library for cultural production, be they writers, artists, researchers, performers or craftspeople.



CASE STUDIES

Casey-Cardinia libraries

There's a vibrant music culture in the Casey-Cardinia libraries of Pakenham, Narre Warren and Hampton Park. Regular Sunday afternoon musical events are held in Narre Warren Library. Their popularity led to a broader musical program in Pakenham and Hampton Park libraries, where locals perform, many of whom are professional jazz, folk and classical musicians. The community, in Melbourne's outer south-eastern growth corridor, currently lacks the cultural venues to match its rapid population growth, and welcomes these free events.

Woodend Library

The Friends of Fibre knitting group at Woodend first met in the library in April 2013. By July, they had draped the library in multi-coloured yarn as part of the Woodend Winter Wonderland Festival. The community art project had people queuing at the doors to get in and doubled the number of library visitors. Hundreds of new people came into Woodend's Library and Shire Customer Service Centre as a result of the art project. Many commented on the joy, warmth, fun and great atmosphere it generated in the town.

LENS
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LIBRARIES AS CULTURAL CONNECTORS

What the study revealed

The library connects people from across the local community. It allows people to meet and share a collective experience, seeding community-driven cultural activities.

Libraries connect people with each other, they also connect people with literature, art, ideas and other forms of creativity. They forge cultural links across precincts, communities and regions, and with other culture-making organisations and individuals. They induct new people into communities and help them navigate the social and cultural networks that promise a sense of belonging.



Yarra Libraries

The Moon Festival was a partnership between Yarra Libraries and a community group; it involved a range of people from the community, including Chinese and Vietnamese groups. Part of the festival dragon, which later appeared in the street celebrations, was made in the library. Library Service Manager Margherita Barbante explains, 'Stepping outside to engage with different community groups is important ... we build new conversations in the community, and find that we can actually bring people back to the library to experience other activities.'

Gannawarra Library Service

After major flooding in 2011 that devastated more than 100 homes, Gannawarra Library Service considered how to keep an accurate record of the event for the community. The library established the 100 Frames project. Local people were invited to submit photos of the flooding. Nearly 6000 photos were submitted and 100 photos became a travelling exhibition with a life of its own, travelling through Victoria and New South Wales, drawing the community together to record and reflect on the event.

LIBRARIES SUPPORTING AUSTRALIA'S COMPLEX CULTURAL MOSAIC

What the study revealed

The library is a place where different cultural groups connect, stimulating cross-cultural conversation and understanding.

Victoria's public libraries have responded in imaginative and innovative ways to nurture Australia's diverse, multicultural society. Libraries promote stories from many community groups, curate Indigenous events, provide reading materials in languages other than English and meeting spaces for community, local history and heritage groups.



CASE STUDIES

Swan Hill Library

The Harmony Day committee at Swan Hill has 35 community members, including Aboriginal people, Pacific Islanders and Africans. The first Harmony Day in 2010 attracted over 1500 people, predominantly migrants and refugees, and the following year 4000 people. Community meetings for Harmony Day are held at the library after hours, and the library is where people come between meetings because new immigrants see the library as a non-threatening place.

Maribyrnong Library

The City of Maribyrnong's 74,000 residents represent over 80 language groups and have 135 different countries of origin. Vietnamese, Indian, Chinese, Italian, Sri Lankan, Burmese, Sudanese, Ethiopian and Bangladeshi are among the cultural and language groups represented. The library service has significant community language collections, provides English language tuition and mentoring, and sponsors cultural festivals and events that attract record crowds.

LIBRARIES NURTURING THE CULTURE OF THE WRITTEN AND SPOKEN WORD

What the study revealed

The library inspires and promotes reading, literacy, storytelling, writing and discussing written and spoken ideas.

Victorian public libraries support an extraordinary range and volume of word, literacy and literary-based activities. This report revealed that over a two-year period Victorian libraries hosted more than 40,000 story- and rhyme-time sessions, and 17,000-plus literary festival events, author talks, literacy classes, book groups and public lectures. These are much loved by users, and cross age, gender and cultural differences.



Boroondara Library Service

The Word It Up: Boroondara Literary Awards highlight the Boroondara Library Service's role as a centre for literature. In partnership with the Rotary Club of Balwyn, the awards have been running for 16 years. The open short story competition attracts over 1000 entries and each year's winning entries are collated in an anthology. Boroondara also hosts the literary event BookTalk, where a staff member shares a favourite book with a group of ten or more people.

Bayside Library Service

Words by the Bay is a year-long program of literary workshops, author talks, debates and poetry readings coordinated by Bayside Library Service. The series began in February 2014, with the aim of involving everyone in the municipality in a celebration of words and creative expression. The University of the Third Age participates in the program, as do local history, writing, drama and poetry groups. Writing and poetry workshops are offered, along with book launches, theatre performance, poetry readings and immersive, history-related walking tours.

PROPOSITIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Public libraries make a significant contribution to cultural life in Victoria. They attract strong community support and participation. Public libraries nurture creativity, learning and play; they provide access to knowledge, ideas, connections and discussion. They bring a range of specific arts and cultural experiences to diverse groups, fostering community interactions.

The cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries will be enhanced by:

- greater visibility
- more consistent promotion
- the availability of flexible library spaces
- the evolution of diverse staff skills
- stronger partnerships with other cultural institutions and organisations
- access to a greater range of funding streams
- public confidence about the established cultural role libraries perform in their communities.

'Public libraries nurture creativity, learning and play; they provide access to knowledge, ideas, connections and discussion'



