

# OUR LIBRARY THEIR SPACE: THE DUNEDIN CITY LIBRARY TEEN SPACE

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*In May 2008 Dunedin Public Libraries opened its new Teen Space in the city library. This paper examines the design process from initial concept to completed space, including consultation with the wider youth community and the crucial role they played in the process. Discussed are the way the space is used, who uses it, the flexibility of the space including as a performance space and as an exhibition space for artwork. The external relationships, what has worked, what has not worked and what is next are also assessed. Edited version of a paper presented at '12 to 24s @ your public library in Australia and New Zealand conference' Beenleigh Qld 11-12 June 2010.*

Like many libraries, Dunedin had struggled to connect with teens and the teenage world. We had exemplary and relevant collections and a small dedicated young adult space. We had an understanding of how many people aged 13-17 lived in the city boundaries and what proportion of that population was registered as borrowers. But we had real problems of getting the message out into the teen world and getting more teens, especially those who were not already using the library, into the library.

What changed? A combination of things including a bequest, designated to be used for youth, and the redevelopment of several areas of the city library freeing up the space needed to create a purpose built space for teens. These factors combined with the knowledge that the city library is to undergo considerable structural change in the not too distant future, meant that we were able to develop a very much experimental teen area. With this development has come new and real ways to connect with the youth community. Critical to the success of this development was the project manager and the project team which included the head of youth services, and the writer.

## **Consultation with the youth community**

We had always endeavoured to find out what teens 13-17 really want in a library. This process began in the late 1990s with a series of focus groups. The limited space of the existing young adult area, measuring 6.5m x 8m in its entirety, and its position with adult fiction on one side and the newspapers on the other, meant that many of the suggestions became little more than a wish list. The internal useable space framed by the shelves was 5m x 6.5m. Into this space we squeezed two computers, a free

standing notice board, a small book display area, two small armchairs and a round table with four seats.

In 2002 the library was invited to become a founding member of the Dunedin Youth Expo. The expo is a two day event held annually for year 10 students from Dunedin and Otago high schools. Its aim is to promote resiliency and help seeking behaviour in young people by the communication of messages through stalls in a youth friendly forum. The expo gives teens the opportunity to learn how to remain physically, mentally, spiritually and socially healthy and to make positive choices when confronted with challenges. Around 1000 students attend it over the two days.

Each year at the expo we gave the students the opportunity to voice what they would like in their ideal library space. From 2002 to 2007 the same comments came back. They wanted

- couches, beanbags, cushions
- xbox, playstation
- tv/dvd player, plus access to dvds to watch
- listening posts with a wide choice of music
- cds, computer games to borrow
- books, magazines, graphic novels, manga
- free internet and email
- food vending machines
- somewhere to eat food
- somewhere to crash
- somewhere to study
- friendly staff – but not in the space itself thanks!

This information was included in the brief given to the city architects who had the responsibility for designing the new teen space.

We were aware that in Dunedin there are very few social spaces that are youth friendly, allowing teens to meet with friends and socialise. So it was

intended from the onset that the teen space would go beyond being purely a library space, housing just the young adult collections plus appropriate furnishings. The space would also offer opportunities for interaction, including social, with the wider community. It would be large enough to accommodate all the teen collections, library computers (website, catalogue and free internet), comfortable furniture, and space for groups to meet and socialize at the same time providing for individual needs. The fiction and cd collections would be on mobile units to allow for the performance spaces. There would be a permanent exhibition space for teen artwork.

Additional to this information, the architects looked at other libraries and what they were providing for teens. They then went beyond the library by looking at the other spaces that teens like to frequent in Dunedin, exploring how these spaces are used by them and why they are attracted to them. A draft design was developed.

We were very fortunate at this point to have opportunity to consult with newly formed Dunedin City Council youth action committee (Yac) made up of 10 people aged 14-24 years. Yac met with the working group and architects to look at the completed design and make suggestions. This process was valuable to the overall development and continuing success of the space. It certainly taught all involved the valuable lesson of never making assumptions about what teens want and what they like.

On the whole they approved of the plans, and were excited about being involved in the development. What did surprise us, however, was that without exception they criticised the inclusion of gaming computers. They asked how we expected to manage them, stop people bringing their own games and most importantly how were xboxes, playstations or wiis going to help teens to engage with the library collections.

We took on board their comments and other changes suggested and the architects adapted the design accordingly. We do not have playstations, xboxes or wiis in the teen space. They are not missed and not having

them has in no way affected the popularity of the space.

Richard Murphy, the architect responsible for the final design of the teen space, made the following statement about the process

The project, collaboration with library staff and the youth action committee, was inspired by Rachel Van Riel's work *Opening the book* and, in particular, her observation that teens, although wishing to be treated as adults, vehemently reject associating themselves with anything their parents might approve of. The fundamental building block of the project was learning to hit the teenage 'soft spot' by matching the constraints of the physical environment with appropriate adornment of the space.

### **The space**

The teen space at 16.5m x 13.5m plus entrance corridor, is more than twice the size of the previous area and includes many of the things that teens have been asking for over the years. As well as all of the teen collections it includes retro furniture sourced from local second hand shops and auction rooms – we have two leather couches, two leather arms chairs, an older 1970s orange material covered couch, round table with 1970s vinyl covered kitchen chairs – a food vending machine, library infostations (website, catalogue, free internet), 12 beanbags in a variety of fabrics and colours, a widescreen tv (Channels 1, 2, 3, 4, Maori tv, Prime and additional documentary and entertainment Sky channels) operated by key pad, and four internet based touch screen listening posts with cordless headphones. Last December a foosball table was added to the space. This has proved to be very popular with both sexes and is in regular use, particularly after school.

The space itself is uniquely 'Dunedin' and reflects its diverse youth culture. The entrance way is adorned with 'acquired' street signs; the floor is covered with carpet tiles which are organised to appear as different rooms. Richard's aim was to make the space as different from the rest of the library as a teenager aims to make their bedroom different from the rest of the family home. The ceiling has been removed over the space, revealing ducting, wiring and the bare bones of the building. The lighting fixtures include second hand chandeliers plus a distinctive designer lamp shade made of strips of red felt. The hanging mechanism for artwork features metal grids fixed to the walls creating a gallery space. These grids were acquired, free, from the local countdown supermarket when it refurbished. The grids had previously been used as

cages to hold merchandise. The permanent artworks that adorn walls and ceiling are by local young artists. The most controversial feature is a wall constructed from withdrawn and discarded books which have been bolted to each other and the wall behind. A coffee table made from a solid block of discarded books complements the wall. This wall feature, as well as being decorative, acts as a notice board for teens to put up their own notices about things they wish to promote. We provide the pins.

There is no mistaking where you are and who the space is intended for.

### **The launch**

It was imperative that we get the launch of the space right, maximising the opportunity to connect with teens. It needed to be relevant.

As is often the way with projects the end date seemed to be moving all the time. Initially we thought the opening would be in February, with someone suggesting we open on the 29<sup>th</sup> (leap year). Then it was later moved to April, with the suggestion of April Fools' Day. I was concerned that although the dates chosen were meaningful in terms of the calendar, they showed no relevance to teens nor showed any way to connect the launch of the new teen space to them.

As a means to use the launch to engage the youth community I suggested that we hold the launch in the last week of May and include it as part of Dunedin's national youth week activities. Also, as Dunedin has such a strong distinct Indie music culture, I suggested it might be good to tie the launch into NZ music month and we could invite young local musicians to perform. The working group members were all in agreement and a sense of what the launch could look like began to take shape. We took this proposal to Yac, which liked the idea and was willing to support us.

The youth expo was held two weeks prior to the opening, so we were able to hand out the programs to over 900 year 10 students, inviting them to the opening and events over the following week. The whole week was extremely successful with the space

being used from the outset by those it was designed for.

We launched the new space on Sunday 25 May 2008 to coincide with New Zealand national youth week, with music, food and celebration. The live music continued through the following week with performances every evening and following weekend by teen musicians, bands and dance troupes – 17 acts over the week. The local high schools and colleges got behind the library by promoting and supporting their own young musicians. We had from classical to rock with a bit of everything in between. The Teen Space was well and truly launched.

### **What we learnt through the design process and launch**

- it is too easy to make incorrect assumptions about what teens might want
- we need to find appropriate ways to communicate/promote to teens. Using our usual channels to publicise the launch had minimal impact. We found that teens have their own viral communication networks, their own way of publicising what is worth going to. The teen musicians and performers brought their own audiences with them, publicising their performances in ways appropriate to them.
- That youth appreciate being consulted with and listened to and respected. This was verbalised by teens throughout the development process and launch.
- the space itself has raised awareness of the library among youth in general – it is self promoting and is referred to by many as TS
- Richard Murphy the architect indeed had hit the teen 'soft spot'.

### **Ongoing use and events in the Teen Space**

The success of the space has exceeded all expectations. We have seen an increased number of teens in the library and in the space on a daily basis. There has been a broadening of the age range of teens visiting and staying in the library.

The space has been a catalyst and has provided new and increased opportunities for us to work with the wider youth community including schools and alternative educators. Relocation of the space from the far corner of the ground floor to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor beside the dvd, music cd, and adult magazine collections has meant greater awareness by teens of the rest of the library and its collections.

Since the opening we have held the following well attended and successful events in the Teen Space

- performances by teens during NZ music month. We have just completed our 3<sup>rd</sup> successful year of NZ music month gig nights, with 13 performances through May 2010. Young musicians like the Teen Space as a performance space for several reasons. There are very few venues that they can afford to play in or that do not have an age restriction of 18+. Also, everything in the Teen Space moves.. It absorbs the sound well, so the impact on other parts of the library is mostly minimal. It can also accommodate a large audience.
- performances by ethnic dance troupes including Indian and belly dancing
- short films made by teens
- fashion shows on dvd by third year fashion design school students
- NHNZ film screenings. The library is fortunate to be able to show these documentaries while they are on loan to us. Many of them have teen appeal – similar to what is available on Nature Discovery
- play previews from local theatres
- use of the space by a tv crew which was filming a program about teens and dancing, to be aired on national television. This filming took a whole day, without disrupting the normal use of the space or access to the collections.
- author workshops
- heritage festival events of teen interest
- art exhibitions from local high schools and the Otago Polytechnic School of Fashion Design
- schools and alternative educators have used it for special meetings/lunches independent of library staff
- the Dunedin youth action committee AGM and promotion.

The space is used on a daily basis for

- visits and tours from high schools, colleges and alternative education groups

- independent use by school students during school time with school approval
- international students learning English, as a study space
- special needs groups and their carers
- use by older (18-20 year old) polytechnic students – particularly popular with clothing design students
- after school each day – the space is full most days with high school students years 9-13
- heavy use by teens in the evenings and weekends.

### **The rules**

There is no desk within the space itself, although there is a help desk close by to provide a reference service and support when required. For the most part the teens using the space live up to our expectations that they will behave appropriately in the space. Of course there are exceptions, so we have needed to develop strategies and procedures to keep the space running smoothly and safely. There are three security cameras giving a complete view of the space. Phillipa and I worked with library managers to identify a small group which manages the space. This means we are able to maintain a consistent and fair approach to managing the space and behavioural issues that occasionally arise. Our rules are presented as a values statement and are based on the library's conditions of use policy for library users. This is displayed in the space as one A4 poster.

### **Values statement**

- *we will all respect the Teen Space and everyone who uses the space, including library staff*
- *anyone who behaves in a way that intimidates or affects another person's ability to use the Teen Space may be trespassed from the library and the plaza for a period of up to two years*
- *using bad language (swearing) anywhere in the library is unacceptable. Anyone doing so will be asked to stop or leave the library*
- *volume levels should not interfere with other people's use of the library. People may be asked to quieten down or leave the library*
- *smoking or rolling cigarettes in the library is not allowed. Anyone doing so will be asked to stop or leave the library*
- *the use of alcohol, illegal drugs or restricted substances is not allowed. Anyone who brings in*

or is found using them will automatically be trespassed. Anyone found under the influence of them will be asked to leave the library and may be trespassed

- you are welcome to put notices/posters promoting events, items of interest, comments and suggestions up on the notice board and 'book wall' in the Teen Space. Pins are kept in the notice board for this use. Anything with an offensive content will be removed.

### **Food**

The Teen Space is the only food friendly area in the library. We have an A3 poster on the vending machine outlining the types of food that are okay to eat in the space

- food bought from the vending machine to be eaten or similar food brought into the space may be eaten there
- fruit, sandwiches, filled rolls etc are allowed
- greasy or messy takeaway meals are not allowed
- drinks water, fruit juice in bottles allowed, cold/hot drinks in covered cups are allowed
- fizzy drinks not allowed.

### **External factors contributing to the success**

Just before the development of the space, the library went through the process of developing a new policy for schools, *The Dunedin Public Libraries' learning support policy*. This allows preschools, daycare centres, kindergartens, primary schools, intermediates, high schools, colleges and alternative educators (up to year 13) to hold library cards with the same borrowing privileges as a child or teen.

Although only several high schools and alternative educators have taken advantage of this policy, the goodwill offered in the policy has been very beneficial. There has been an increased awareness of the library by high schools and alternative educators, providing us with increased opportunity to work more closely with the school community. The opening of the space also made the library very visible to our schools. We are having an ever increasing demand for general and topic specific visits to the

city library. The old space was too small to hold a class and although high schools did visit on a regular basis the students were 'homeless' and had to find places round about to study.

The close proximity of three high schools within five minutes walking distance of the city library has also contributed to the successful ongoing use of the space. The city library's central location means that all of the other schools and colleges are a maximum of a 10-15 minutes bus ride away.

### **What has not worked**

We had to move the computer hub of four machines and tables from its original position shortly after opening the space. Its position, close to the entrance way, created a perceived and real barrier to users entering the space. Quieter/shyer teens felt intimidated by what appeared to be a large crowd of sometimes unprepossessing looking teens. Adult library users also complained about the noise coming from the space through the entrance way. Moving the hub further into the space immediately reduced the noise to an acceptable level and the entrance way became inviting. We were able to move the computer hub without it impacting on any other aspect of the space as the size and design of the space allows for movement of contents without impacting on the overall function or visual effect of the space.

### **Bouquets and brickbats**

One of the biggest compliments received immediately after the space was opened was a request, from a year 12 media studies student, for permission to make a documentary around the space and initial responses to it. The *A tale of a Teen Space* by Alice Maclaurin looks at the response to the space by teens.

In November 2009 the space won a Southern Architecture award for interior architecture

Historically libraries have found it difficult to attract teenagers. A brave decision by the Dunedin Public Library led to this reinvention of one of its spaces, turning the traditional design approach on its head. A chaotic interior environment uses a strong conceptual basis to appeal to youth. It strips a fantastic piece of brutalist architecture back to its bones and adds layers of riotous colour and texture. The result is raw, fun and comfortable.

Amongst the numerous bouquets received there has been the occasional brickbat including a negative article in a local weekly newspaper *D-Scene*. We also found that some teens were averse to change, and initially found difficulty in adjusting to a very

different space than they had been used to. Some opposed the size of the space and its broader use. They preferred the small space where there was room for some, but not all, of the teen collections and which could comfortably hold no more than a dozen people. A few teens, and their parents, have complained about teens using the space who dress differently or have different life values to their own.

All comments are welcomed and responded too with sensitivity and respect. At the same time, we point out that the library is for the whole community and we cannot make any judgement about dress style and/or legal life choices and values.

### **Where to now**

Two years on and the future is looking bright for the Teen Space. The space has opened and continues to open many doors and opportunities to provide and promote relevant and appropriate library services to teens.

It is self promoting and continues to draw young people from throughout the community. We are now at the point where we are being invited to develop partnerships with organisations within the community who see the space as a desirable and appropriate venue.

At the beginning of the development it really was 'Our library, their space'. Two years on it has definitely become 'Their space in their library'. The main points leading to the continuing success of the endeavour have been to keep consulting with the youth of Dunedin, and building relationships with organisations and events that support them.

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