“More than just a library”: Public libraries in the ‘smart city’

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A B S T R A C T

This paper argues that the transformation of the contemporary public library can be usefully understood by situating it within the context of the technology-driven urban vision of the ‘smart city’. We explore this through a focus on a recent public library development in Australia where a high-profile new library features as a signature investment in the city’s broader digital and ‘smart city’ strategies. In analysing the library’s entanglement with the digital visions of this city, our case study reveals the uneven and often contradictory impacts that characterize the digital economy. We argue that the articulation of a technology-led agenda with neoliberal governance settings has produced institutional tensions that go to the core of the library’s role in public life, challenging us to consider how libraries might best serve a range of rapidly changing and competing needs and publics. We find that while libraries have been forced to make certain changes, they have also developed proactive responses to new technology. Efforts to reinvent themselves as ‘hubs’, ‘makerspaces’ and co-located community centres offering enriched spaces for social gathering, targeted learning, and new forms of creative production, including entrepreneurial activity and innovation, are strategies for maintaining and extending the traditional remit of the public library. However, these transformations are not adequately recognised within the structures through which libraries are evaluated and funded, thus making them vulnerable to future governmental agendas.

1. Introduction

Far from becoming obsolete with the expansion of digital archives (Brindley, 2002, p. 27), public libraries have turned out to be highly adaptable institutions that have not only survived the digital revolution, but are helping to shape it. As Paulina Mickiewicz (2016, p. 239) observes, “libraries are no longer ‘just libraries,’ but a hybrid of different specializations and services that have come together to create a new public space.” This transition has not occurred in a vacuum. Rather, it is part of a much broader shift within cities towards so-called post-industrial economies, driven by new technologies, programs of urban regeneration, and the promotion of ‘knowledge capital’ within neoliberal policy settings.

The ‘smart city’ model is the latest iteration of this shift, promoting a technologised vision of the city characterised by efficient infrastructure, ‘innovation’, and ‘disruption’. Public libraries have been entangled in these visions as spaces that support entrepreneurship, innovation, digital literacy, and creative production. While this entanglement has led to increased funding and public recognition of libraries in some cities, it has also tied them to instrumental economic agendas in tension with the public role they have traditionally served.

Significant scholarly work, particularly within Library and Information Studies, has celebrated the dramatic scope of changes in libraries since the advent of the internet (see Mattern, 2007; Palfrey, 2015; Woodward, 2013). Other literature attempts to capture elements of this transformation through an array of new terminology. Libraries have been reconceptualised as “redistributive technology” (Wyatt, McQuire, & Butt, 2015), as part of an “infrastructural ecology” (Mattern, 2014), or as a “platform” that is “as ubiquitous and persistent as the streets and sidewalks of a town” (Weinberger, 2012). It has been less common however, to situate these changes within the transition to so-called ‘post-industrial economies’, or to connect it systematically to the reconfiguration of public spaces and cultural infrastructure in contemporary cities. Nor has existing scholarship sought to position the transformation of libraries in the broader context of neoliberal governance. As public libraries become increasingly entangled in the rhetoric and policy settings associated with the ‘digital economy’, adopting such perspectives becomes increasingly urgent.

In this article we ask: What are the impacts of these agendas on the funding, mandate, and day-to-day operation of public libraries? And how are libraries negotiating and legitimating their changing role? We consider these questions through the case study of Geelong, an
Australian regional city located on Melbourne’s periphery. Geelong is currently seeking to transition from a manufacturing economy to a ‘knowledge economy’ by embracing the ‘smart city’ model. A new high-profile public library – the Geelong Library and Heritage Centre (GLHC) – features as a signature investment in its digital strategy outlining its future planning.

Geelong specifically, and Australia more generally, are interesting sites to observe these processes. Library investment is occurring in very different economic conditions to the austerity measures being implemented across Europe, the U.K., and North America following the Global Financial Crisis (see Dudley, 2013; Forkert, 2016; Jaeger, Graham, Bertot, & Sarin, 2014). While Australian governance settings continue to privilege neoliberal ideals of deregulation, privatization, and market-based solutions to social problems, its public institutions have not had to weather the severe cuts of many in the U.K. and U.S. Libraries have thus had more cushioning to adapt to changing governmental agendas and to the new challenges brought about by networked digital technologies.

Our case study has certainly adopted a familiar neoliberal rhetoric that promotes libraries as service hubs for innovation and entrepreneurial activity. But it is also clear that this rhetoric does not necessarily correspond with the library’s day-to-day operation, nor with library staff’s deep commitment to the values of public culture and universal access. In talking about libraries’ entanglement with the digital visions for their cities, we mean to signal their ambivalent relationship to these agendas, agendas within which they have a compromised degree of independence and agency. Libraries adopt the rhetoric of the digital economy and smart city for a range of reasons: sometimes tactically to win support from funders; some see the imperative of contemporary cities to attract the coveted class of mobile knowledge workers that are vital to their sustained development. As “flexible” institutions that have proactively adapted to a digital culture (Wyatt et al., 2015), libraries have become ripe sites for investment as part of numerous cities’ smart city and urban renewal programs aimed at promoting themselves as innovative and creative. Unlike other public services (like post offices) and industries (traditional print and television), libraries have precociously incorporated digital technologies into their institutional model. As Shannon Mattern (2007) recounts, during the mid-to late-1990s public libraries were confronting claims about their imminent obsolescence in the digital era (see for instance MIT Technology Review, 2005). These were exacerbated by the decentralisation of the city and the concomitant suburbanisation and urban sprawl in many American cities. As a result, libraries “struggled to convince local taxpayers of the continued, and perhaps even increased, relevance of their downtown library buildings despite – or perhaps because of – digitisation and decentralisation” (Mattern, 2007, p. 34). At the same time, libraries – like many other public institutions – faced a prolonged period of declining investment as neoliberal governmentality withdrew funds from the public sphere (Dudley, 2013, p. 4).

Faced with these interlinked pressures – digitisation and diminishing investment – libraries saw strategic advantage in aligning themselves more closely with the economic and planning agendas of the city authorities upon whom their funding depends (see Mattern, 2007). They accomplished this through three broad shifts. First, through investing in new technologies, spaces, and programs, libraries sought to expand their customer-base to demonstrate to governments their relevance and value to a wider public (Palfrey, 2016). Second, under the mandate of enrolling citizens in the digital economy, libraries have invested in new expertise and developed partnerships with external organisations to become centres for a wide spectrum of programs. These range from upskilling ‘creatives’ and tech-savvy users, to supporting start-ups and bridging the digital divide through digital literacy programs. And third, public libraries have positioned themselves as architecturally significant touristic ‘destinations’ in their own right. Expensive developments of new and existing library buildings designed by
The growing prominence of public libraries in smart city policies does not necessarily mean that libraries are actually achieving the regenerative claims made by these strategies. What we seek to draw attention to here is the way they are being *mobilized* within this rhetoric to orient themselves around very different agendas to those they have historically served over the course of the last century. By attaching themselves to urban narratives of economic transition – in particular the smart city model – libraries have gained leverage to attract more funding and investment. But these agendas have also freighted them with new objectives and forms of public responsibility. In the remainder of this paper, we draw on the case study of one particular library in Geelong, Australia to articulate some of the tensions that emerge from this ambiguous position.

### 3. Geelong, a regional ‘smart city’ in the making

With a population of over 280,000, Geelong is the second largest city in the State of Victoria, located approximately 35 kilometres from the State capital, Melbourne (see Fig. 1 below). The city has a long history of dependence on primary industries: woollen mills were established in the 1920s and since then Geelong has become a manufacturing heartland for the automotive industry and associated industries like steel and aluminium processing. Like many cities in developed economies whose prosperity has hinged on manufacturing, Geelong has seen these jobs move off shore and the resulting economic impacts cascade through the rest of the city’s economy (Keneley, Dimovski, & Stevenson, 2014).

As manufacturing jobs become automated or move offshore, the city has sought to invest in new digital technologies and networked infrastructure in order to transition to a sustainable future based around a knowledge workforce of public sector employment, new start-up businesses, and their attendant service industries (see Leorke, 2016). Geelong’s plan to “transition to a nationally recognised digital economy” is outlined in *Digital Geelong* (City of Greater Geelong, 2015), a report spearheaded by the City of Greater Geelong’s former mayor, Darren Lyons. *Digital Geelong* outlines this strategy across thirty recommendations organised around local government, community, and business. Like many such strategies, these initiatives are at once practical and aspirational: for example, creating a Geelong Data Dashboard is intended to provide “acute civic insight and for giving opportunities to partners and residents to read, share and use data” (p. 4); partnering with tertiary education providers will “attract talent” and “develop skills” (p. 5). As a “generative”, statement of “direction over the coming decade” (p. 7), *Digital Geelong* outlines initiatives that lay the foundations for the city to benefit economically and socially from the potential of networked digital infrastructure, while suggesting, indirectly, that substantive economic change is still a long way off.

#### 3.1. Re-envisioning the 21st century library

Geelong’s new Library and Heritage Centre features prominently in the Strategy in just this practical-cum-aspirational way. The strategy recommends exploiting the potential of the new library to support digital inclusion (p. 4), and seeks to ensure that it has “the capacity, tools and approach to be a Geelong tech-hub, makerspace or fablab in the future” (p. 4). According to the library’s website the AU$45 million (approx. US$35m/C$28m) building is “symbolic of the evolution of Geelong from a city founded on heavy industry to a centre for excellence, culture and learning” (Geelong Regional Libraries, n.d.). Clearly visible from the city’s main railway station, the library was opened in November 2015 and by late 2017 had ushered more than one million visitors through its doors.

The building’s architectural design deliberately amplifies its symbolic significance as perhaps the most visible manifestation of the city’s digital vision. In striking contrast to the nineteenth century neoclassicism of the nearby Town Hall and Geelong Art Gallery, the domed library building is patterned in a fractal crystalline design which, for the lay person, projects a sense of ‘science at work’ in an accessible, retro-futuristic mode (see Fig. 2 below). Outfitted with the fastest broadband in the country, multiple screens, and a suite of the latest digital technologies, the library is a technology hub extending technological capacity to all sectors of the community from “routine stuff” like iPad basics classes, to “creative stuff” like teaching photo-editing and digital story-telling to young adults (Ferencz, transcript, 2016). Popular analogies for the building abound: a giant golf ball, an igloo, and from former mayor, Darren Lyons, “Geelong’s huge brain” (Cuthbertson, 2015).

It is worth dwelling briefly on this last metaphor because it alludes to understandings that underpin the potential transformative impact of smart city agendas, and to the divergent ways in which public infrastructure (like libraries) might support them. One of the main critiques of smart city thinking is that it is driven by a command and control model fed by ubiquitous computing technology, or “everyware” (Greenfield, 2006), and big data. As Shepard observes, these service centralised systems exert top-down control over urban space, processes, and populations (2014, p. 19). The library as ‘brain’ here might serve this vision in an instrumental fashion by delivering short-term programs and resources that facilitate compliance with online government services and prioritise training and readiness for an emerging era of...
flexible, precarious employment.

But libraries might be conceptualised as ‘brains’ in a less centralised, networked way – redistributing public resources (Wyatt et al., 2015) and supporting more democratic, bottom-up versions of the smart city, or, what Shepherd has called the “smart citizen” (2014, n.p.). Kate Torney, former head of Australia’s public broadcasting service and now CEO of State Library Victoria (located in nearby central Melbourne) sees libraries as ‘problem-solvers’ in this vein:

They’re looking at broader community issues and what role they could play to help solve problems [...] lots of transformation projects that I’ve seen or I’ve read about or I’ve studied or tried to model are often top-down. And I think if you think of media transformation, it’s often top-down. Whereas in libraries, what you see – smaller public libraries responding to particular user-needs and issues and then sharing. So it’s a very collaborative space. (Torney transcript, 2017)

With their deep expertise in sharing resources and serving diverse publics, (Audunson, 2005; Vårheim, Steinmo, & Ide, 2008) libraries have a record of using new technologies to foster increased participation and collaboration between social groups and sectors, brokering partnerships, and enabling forms of knowledge transfer from which new solutions to social and economic problems might evolve. Some of these aspirations are articulated in Digital Geelong: to “[t]reat staff (and the community) as part of a crowd sourced online problem solving network”; to aspire to “whole of community inclusion” and work with “skills providers and not for profit organisations to engage/upskill key target groups” (p. 4).

It is in this context that the new theoretical terminology which attempts to capture the ontological transformation of the library attains some salience. As “platforms” (Weinberger, 2012), “hubs” (Only Melbourne, n.d.) or “nodes in a network” (Palfrey, 2016, 81) libraries can be understood to link people to information, services and to each other, within ‘smart cities’ of flexible, digitally networked knowledge workers. These flexible “meso-level” sites (Mansell, 2002), proactive in the adoption of new technologies and adaptable to a wide range of community needs, are well positioned to support a more inclusive, democratic vision of the smart city, focusing “our attention”, writes Weinberger, “away from the provisioning of resources to the foment those resources engender” (2012).

3.2. Pivoting between traditional values and new agendas

Speaking to Cathy Ferencz, Executive Manager of Collection and Technologies Access for Geelong Library and Heritage Centre, it becomes evident that the library is delicately balancing its rhetorical commitment to Geelong’s smart city narrative, with a more traditional public service ethos of ‘universal access’ and ‘social inclusion’. She says, “Geelong [is] going through a huge change at the moment from a manufacturing base to a knowledge economy: that’s where the council’s taking us [...] so the public libraries have to support that” (transcript, 2015). Ferencz credits the new building itself with attracting a diverse range of users and fostering diverse types of use. Its flexible furnishings and range of facilities make the library a “destination” for grandparents babysitting children while their parents are at work; a casual meeting place from which people head off elsewhere; a “safe place” for children to use after school; a “news lounge where people would come and go, not necessarily to use the collection, but just to meet and to relax and to read maybe the magazines or the newspapers” (transcript, 2016; see Fig. 3 below).

This account resonates strongly with the familiar characterisation of the library as a ‘third place’, a term that has come to dominate how its value is articulated in so much of the library studies literature (Audunson, 2005; Bilandzic & Foth, 2013; Black & Pepper, 2012). As a third place – that place between home and work (Oldenberg, 1989) – the library provides a “low-intensive” (Audunson, 2005) space of conviviality and comfort where a range of different communities and users can feel a sense of belonging through low-stakes forms of participation. In emphasising this “recreational” role (see Black & Pepper, 2012: 35), Ferencz suggests that the library shapes a broader public culture through its social and affective impact on users. This is not to say that libraries no longer serve a more traditional Habermasian conception of the public sphere. Ferencz notes that even though book borrowing has declined, visitation levels have increased, particularly at events like author talks and lectures, suggesting an appetite for ‘knowledge’ and the public sharing of ideas.

But the library’s most obvious response to the rhetoric of the smart city is in its ambitions to establish itself as a centre for the city’s new knowledge workforce, anticipated as filling the vacuum left by Geelong’s diminishing manufacturing sector. Ferencz mentions that Geelong Library’s fast broadband and meeting-room spaces are beginning to be taken up by businesses for collaboration and video conferencing:

We’re the first public library in Australia, I think, outside of a State Library or a university library, obviously, to be connected to AARNet [the Australian national research and education network, a high-speed internet provider primarily utilised by universities and government agencies]. So we’ve got the speeds here. If we tried to encourage people to use the local libraries, the community libraries, as their place of business, I think they might be a bit frustrated with the type of speed that they can access. So I think we can go down
that road with this building (transcript, 2016).

The library is also in discussions to partner with Enterprise Geelong, the Council’s business unit which helps “small and medium-sized businesses and enterprises to start up, and give them advice about where they can go and what they can do” (Ferencz, transcript, 2016). She links the library’s efforts to create these business-oriented partnerships with the council’s “transition to a smart city” which is “a fundamental policy I think at the moment” (transcript, 2016). At the same time, she acknowledges that the library was not directly involved in the development of the strategy, which has been implemented from above (see Leorke, 2016). Nevertheless, the library is obliged to contribute to the momentum that the council is trying to build around new technology and its entrepreneurial applications.

This phenomenon is by no means unique to Geelong. Libraries in Britain, Canada, and cities across North America are similarly positioning themselves as ‘incubators’ for the new forms of labour needed to complete in a global, networked and digital economy. Australia is replete with similar examples: libraries are rebranding themselves as ‘labs’ and ‘digital hubs’, actively courting association with notions of experimentation, innovation, and research that are understood to be the vital currencies of urban economic growth.2

In GLHCs everyday operation however, its facilities, and the energies of its staff are primarily directed towards the far more elementary needs of a community rapidly trying to adapt to a changing technological environment. These efforts align more closely with the library’s historic role of producing modern, informed citizens (Mattern, 2007, p. 29–30) and its broad commitment to ‘access’ than to becoming an incubator of new industries, as imagined by the city’s leaders. The GLHC runs numerous programs supporting digital literacy. Some programs relate to “creative stuff” for children – “movies, photo-editing on the tablet, digital story-telling” (Ferencz, 2016). But most are concentrated around the ‘basics’: in-house programs where library staff train people to use digital devices; and external programs run in partnership with Australia’s largest (private) telecommunications provider, Telstra. This partnership takes digital literacy into community centres and senior citizens clubs where older people are at risk of marginalisation as government and welfare services increasingly shift online. “We could run iPad basics every day and we’d get an audience for that. People are just wanting to know.” (Ferencz transcript, 2016).

Libraries have proactively assumed a role in ‘bridging the digital divide’ before (Jaeger et al., 2014). But this role has now been imposed upon them from above, as they are confronted with the unintended consequences of decisions made at higher levels of government. E-government, the movement of government services to online portals or smartphone apps, constitutes one small but central tenant of the smart city model, part of the ‘efficiencies’ promised by new technologies. E-government initiatives are of course nothing new, but ‘digital by default’ is becoming an increasingly mandatory policy in cities aiming to sell themselves as ‘smart’, ‘efficient’, and ‘transparent’.

This ambition is explicitly outlined in Geelong’s digital strategy, which highlights the city’s “aspiration to be the first platform-based, digital and genuinely data-driven council in [the state of] Victoria” (City of Greater Geelong, 2015, 16). Planning for the Victorian State Government’s flagged shift towards digital services (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2016), Ferencz explains how the library is partnering with non-profit organisations and charities to support those people “that don’t have access to internet, and don’t know how to fill out a form online.” She anticipates that “our libraries are just going to be inundated with people asking for help” (transcript, 2016). Ferencz acknowledges that the e-government policy has put the library under pressure in a variety of ways, compelled to prepare for a large-scale shift that they have neither been consulted about nor resourced for. “[W]e want to make access available, but […] we don’t work in that space, we’re not community service providers in that sense” (transcript, 2016).

This predicament echoes the findings of a U.S.-based study by Bertot, Jaeger, Gorham, Greene Taylor, and Lincoln’s (2013), which notes that without face-to-face government services to assist individuals, this task is often passed on to public libraries. They found that formal collaboration between libraries and government agencies is minimal or non-existent, leaving libraries under-resourced and ill-equipped for the burden imposed on them (Bertot et al., 2013: 131–2). “The end result”, Bertot et al. argue, “is that public libraries and government agencies have become de facto collaborators in the provision of e-government services” (2013, 129) – an experience echoed by several other library administrators we interviewed, including those in more affluent parts of Melbourne.

This “de facto” status aptly articulates the problematic way in which libraries relate to the smart city, a relationship we have expressed as ‘entanglement’. Libraries recognize that the role they play in bridging the digital divide is becoming ever more important in a context in which exercising the rights and duties of citizenship demand increasing access to, and literacy in, online environments. As spaces that are geographically dispersed across the population, and which combine provision of free connectivity, trained staff, and an ethos of access and public service, libraries feel obliged to offer these services, whether they are resourced for them or not. “I think we put a lot of pressure on ourselves as well”, Ferencz admitted:

We think we have so much to offer that we then market ourselves and make ourselves more visible, which sometimes means we haven’t thought about how we’re going to manage that in terms of resources when it does become very popular […] and the numbers come through the door (transcript, 2016).

While Ferencz’ account of the new library is generally optimistic, she reveals the ways in which entrepreneurialist digital agendas and efficiency-driven smart city initiatives gravitate towards servicing an already tech-savvy elite at the expense of those on the peripheries of the digital economy. Ironically, the library risks becoming beholden to these top-down, government and business-driven priorities, while also being responsible for addressing the immediate and everyday needs of communities marginalised by these same agendas.

Mattern (2014) is not alone in predicting an increasingly entrepreneurial role for libraries as providers of training services, content producers, or spaces of independent media production (see also Britton, 2012; Torrone, 2011). While the GLHC may develop these capacities in the future, our profile suggests that the library’s most valuable contribution to the city is, first, as a vibrant civic centre, offering spaces to learn, relax and socialise in a welcoming environment; and, second, as an adaptive institution that can nimbly respond to the immediate needs of a city experiencing rapid change and economic insecurity (Potter, 2012).

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1 In London, the City of Westminster sitsuate “Business Information Point (BIPs)” within four of its libraries (Westminster Reference, Church Street, Pimlico and Paddington). These points offer “resources and networking opportunities for business”, “whether you’re taking your first steps as an entrepreneur, or looking for new ideas for your business” (City of Westminster, 2017, n.p.). The Toronto Public Library provides “Digital Innovation Hubs” at three of its branches (Toronto Reference Library, Fort York and Scarborough Civic Centre) that offer 3D printing labs, workspaces and digital design classes (Toronto Public Library, 2017). Arizona State University, in partnership with the City of Phoenix and Phoenix State Library, have established the Alexandria Co-working Network, with participating libraries offering co-working spaces, workshops and one-on-one mentoring for business entrepreneurs and start-ups (Arizona State University, 2014). The Dallas Public Library even partnered with holding company Sammons Enterprises Inc. to build the Sammons Small Business Centre, situated in the Business and Technology Division which occupies the Library’s 5th floor (Dallas B.R.A.I.N., 2017).

2 See for example “The Edge” at the State Library of Queensland in Brisbane; the Adelaide City Library which features a “Digital Hub” and “Innovation Lab”; the “DX Lab” at the State Library of NSW in Sydney; and the “digital living centre” to be built as part of the State Library of Victoria redevelopment.
4. Metrics and management

The Geelong case study illustrates the disparity between the rhetoric of the smart city, and how the library experiences its everyday role. This next section examines how libraries are managed and evaluated by the governments that fund and support them. Assuming this wider focus, we find further disparity between what governments claim they want libraries to achieve, and the ways in which they are supported in practice.

Geelong’s new library sits without a broader context of similar developments across Melbourne in which libraries are being incorporated into urban redevelopment programs aimed at stimulating innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship. Our research revealed no fewer than eight local government areas, in both inner Melbourne and its sub- and extra-urban hinterlands, whose councils have invested upwards of AU $8 million (approx. US$6.1m/£5m) each into at least one major library development project as part of large-scale urban redevelopment initiatives in the last five years alone. “In the City of Melbourne, three of the network’s six branches opened between 2012 and 2015, designed under a ‘hubs’ model and co-located with other community services. A fourth, the busiest branch, is soon to be upgraded and relocated (Lucas, 2016).”

Beyond these local government-led initiatives, the project that most vividly supports the narrative of ‘knowledge-based’ city branding is the State government funded redevelopment of State Library Victoria, an AU$88 million (approx. US$66m/£55m) revamp that will include: “the refurbishment of the Library’s incomparable heritage spaces, the creation of innovative new spaces for children and teenagers, and the re-invention of our services as we embrace new technologies and promote digital literacy and creativity for all Victorians” (Vision 2020, 2018). The scale and monetary contribution of the redevelopment dwarfs that of any recent investment in the city’s museums and art galleries.

The strong investment in libraries in Victoria – also evident in numerous other Australian states such as New South Wales, Queensland, and South Australia – represents a stark contrast with the decimation of public library funding in the U.K., Europe, U.S., and other austerity-hit regions. But while this investment indicates recognition by planners and private developers of libraries as perceived agents for economic growth and development, investment is piecemeal and uneven, and is not driven by administrative structures at higher levels of government.

Jodi Sneddon is Principal Planner at Infrastructure Victoria, the independent statutory body that provides advice to government on the state’s infrastructural needs. Having helped deliver community infrastructure for greenfield sites and urban renewal projects across Melbourne and Victoria’s regions, she has developed a keen understanding of the library’s versatility. She argues that the perceived universality and inclusiveness of the library makes them ideal spaces for the amalgamation of community services. She says, “there’s not much that we don’t provide as traditional community infrastructure that can’t happen in a library”. Aside from health and mental health facilities, “nearly everything else can plug into this space” (Sneddon transcript, 2016). She proposes a shift in governmental policy at the State and regional level with libraries at the centre of ‘community infrastructure’ planning, where libraries are no longer ‘single-purpose’ entities but incorporate and subsume other community services – maternal and child health, senior citizens’ services, and so on. In this vision, libraries assume a far greater role in infrastructure planning than they currently do, becoming drivers of community policy, working across multiple sectors, and fuelling development and economic growth.

Despite this versatility, and the library’s contribution to government agendas around lifelong learning and bridging the digital divide, funding structures have not kept pace with the library’s expanded role. Funding and management of public libraries is largely determined by local councils, but the State government allocates small amounts of funding – up to AU$750,000 (US$578,000/€471,000) – through a grants scheme for minor upgrades or refurbishments (Victorian Government, n.d.). Sneddon observes that this funding model is nowhere close to the kind of money needed to revamp or build a flexible institution that can serve as a multi-faceted form of community infrastructure. She notes that Docklands Library – “a next generation library and community hub” (Only Melbourne, n.d.) built within former industrial waterfront site and rezoned for high-rise residential apartments – cost AU$20 million.

In a report by KPMG commissioned by the State Government in 2016, libraries are framed within a familiar neoliberal discourse as discrete infrastructure to be managed in terms of ‘efficiency’ and delivering value for money. The report examines options for reducing costs through shared resources (E-catalogues) or streamlining administration through a State-wide library membership card. There is no attempt to situate libraries within a broader urban planning framework or context of community infrastructure. Nor is there a broader attempt to capture the expanded social value of the library as an institution, beyond instrumental metrics.

Libraries themselves are deeply invested in developing better methods of capturing and communicating the diverse forms of value they believe they bring to both public life and to governmental policy agendas. Ferencz told us, “I think the next step for us, for libraries in general, is to find some sort of measurement framework where we can measure our impact on society or community, as opposed to measuring books loaned and wi-fi hits and website visits and things like that” (transcript, 2016; see also Denoon, 2017).

The narrowness of current measurement frameworks reveals a certain hollowness to governmental rhetoric situating libraries in the smart city. Despite governments’ digital strategies, policy documents and promotional material describing libraries as “next-generation community hubs” (Only Melbourne, n.d.) and “assum[ing] a role in co-pro-duction” (City of Greater Geelong, 2015: 26), libraries in the cities we examined are still only evaluated according to traditional metrics. They report on data measuring the number of loans; standard of the library collection (percentage of collection purchased in the last 5 years); the production of a next-generation community library; and some sort of measurement framework where we can measure our impact on society or community, as opposed to measuring books loaned and wi-fi hits and website visits and things like that” (transcript, 2016; see also Denoon, 2017).

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as a centralising urban model rather than one which distributes services, and capacity across the population.

If the re-envisioned public library is to be more than a rhetorical symbol, it needs an expanded evaluation framework within which to capture the more nuanced role libraries are increasingly expected to play in their cities’ development. Moreover, such a framework needs to support mechanisms for increasing funding to libraries to fully fund their expanded function. While libraries themselves are already strong advocates for their contribution to the cultural and economic lives of their communities, their contribution needs to be recognised and championed externally — by urban planning scholars, within public policy, and at higher levels of government — particularly in those cities where libraries have become so much more than a library in the traditional sense.

5. Conclusion

When considering the merits of the library’s entanglement in the smart city, it would be easy for critique to fall reflexively into nostalgia for the way libraries used to be — sedate, suburban institutions, detached from commercial or economic imperatives, where people read books in quiet contemplation. But this vision is itself not true to the compromised and versatile institution the public library has always been. Mattern points out that libraries have always been pulled in numerous, contradictory directions by public and private interests. “[T]he purely benevolent, non-commercial institutions — the institution that served one function and served it well, never really existed” (2007, p. 1). As with all periods of transition, the future impacts of the library’s transformation are yet to fully unfold. Acknowledging this uncertainty, it seems important to highlight the tensions and disjunctures our case study reveals between the big strategic visions in which libraries are entangled, and the realities of their day-to-day operation, administration and governance. These are as much tensions within government as they are tensions between governmental, economic and community agendas. To some extent, this dissonance is the result of the unevenness of the transition to a digital economy across geographies, demographics and economic sectors. As Amin et al. (2000, p. 15) argued almost twenty years ago, the “dream of a future in which … cities become outposts of the global knowledge economy will only work partially and selectively.”

But this dissonance is also the result of the extraordinarily diverse and multifaceted “thing” the library has become. With their adaptability and versatility, libraries are assuming roles and functions which cross over a myriad of different domains within the economic, cultural and social spheres of their cities. While not incommensurate, these domains do not necessarily sit comfortably together. Nor can libraries realistically anticipate how they might best use their skills and resources to address the gaps both between and within these evolving domains. While the economic narrative driving library development has certainly resulted in some vibrant and interesting institutional developments, the library’s role in normalising a very particular vision of urban public life and civic participation should not go unexamined. Critical accounts of the ‘knowledge economy’ (Amin et al., 2000),

References

