



Balmain Library building report

On 4 August 2022, Catherine Bryant and Kate O’Grady met with Caroline McLeod, Senior Manager, Libraries and Community Facilities and Rachel Marreiros, Branch Librarian Balmain and Haberfield libraries, Inner West Council to assess the current Balmain Library space and potential improvements that could be made, as part of the revitalisation of the Balmain Town Hall precinct. This report has been prepared to provide background information on the requirements for contemporary library buildings with reference to Balmain Library.

Library building trends

Current library use trends inform building and service design. The key indicators of public library use ¹ show that libraries are highly valued by their communities.

In 2018/19 there were:

- 34 million physical visits to NSW public libraries
- 40.3 million loans of collection items
- 12.1 million virtual visits to public library websites
- 10 million internet bookings (including wi-fi)
- 95,600 programs and events
- 1.9 million attendees to library programs
- 1.5 million ebook loans

2018/19 provides us with the most recent figures that cover a full year of library services. Library usage figures for 2019/20 and 2020/21 were significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Onsite services during these years were restricted due to COVID-19 Safety Plans, and many branches were closed to the public for extended periods. When library buildings were allowed to open, restrictions on visitor numbers, PC usage, reduced opening hours and a ban on programs and events resulted in lower than usual figures for many services. For this reason, we use 2018/19 statistics when considering regular library usage.

Community demand for programming and events, a variety of spaces, meeting rooms and technology access points are driving growth in the size of library buildings. Modern library buildings need to provide core services such as book lending and display as well as spaces for other services and functions.

¹ www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/advice-and-best-practice/public-library-statistics

Contemporary and future public library buildings must:

- provide easily accessible collections in a range of formats
- provide a cultural hub and focal point for the community
- be functional and multipurpose, accommodating a range of activities and uses
- enable user-friendly access to the latest in technology
- attract a wide range of users
- provide areas for relaxation, research, leisure and learning
- have effective and efficient delivery of services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to rethink the way services are delivered and library spaces are used. New library buildings need to be designed for maximum flexibility to accommodate changes in service requirements. It is easier to build flexibility into a large open space than in a building with a number of permanent rooms. Acoustic treatment is important in larger, open spaces to ensure acoustic privacy. Modular furniture and shelving on wheels allow for the reconfiguration of library spaces. Furniture that can be used inside and outside further increases flexibility. Libraries are increasingly exploring the use of outdoor spaces. Some have outdoor reading areas while others will utilise adjacent green spaces as needed. These spaces have provided a good alternative for the delivery of services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consideration must be given to fencing and safety, shelter and potential social distancing.

*People Places a guide for planning public library buildings*² provides information on library use and planning a library for the local community, including tools to help determine suitable library size and allocation of spaces. State Library Consultants can assist with the use of these tools.

Balmain Library

Balmain Library is located in the 1888 built Town Hall building. The Inner West Council is developing plans for the revitalisation of the Balmain Town Hall precinct, which includes the Town Hall, Court House and the PCYC building. Revitalisation plans include improving the library space, refurbishing the Town Hall to make it more available to the community, and activating outdoor spaces. This process also provides the opportunity to consider the use of the council office building that is located behind the library and includes underutilised space.

Library building sizes for different populations

The *People Places library building calculator*³ provides a number of methods to determine library size and allocation of spaces. For an appropriately sized library building with enough space for collections, seating, PCs and the range of services and spaces expected in a contemporary library building, the State Library recommends using the *People Places service calculator*. The table below shows the minimum recommended library size for different catchment populations and the recommended larger floor areas that include potential additional library services, using the *People Places services calculator*.

² <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/people-places>

³ <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/people-places/library-building-calculator>

Population catchment	Minimum recommended library branch size in square metres ⁴	Recommended size, including space for additional services ⁵	Recommended floor area for collections	Recommended number of seats	Square metres required for seating (30% individual, 40% lounge, 30% group study)
10,000	690	890	176	73	235
20,000	1,234	1,309	353	122	395
30,000	1,583	1,736	529	167	541
40,000	1,920	2,132	706	207	671

The minimum recommended library size has been determined for a branch library by selecting 'No' for central library, with non-resident workforce not included.

The recommended size with space for additional services, and the seating and collection spaces uses a collection size of 1.2 items per capita (the median for population of 150,001 and above). The collection breakdown is 70% books, 10% periodicals, 10% non-books, 10% virtual, with the assumption that 30% of the collection is likely to be on loan at any one time. Calculations also include a meeting room for 20 people and 2 small meeting rooms for 10 people and a multipurpose/training room for 20 people. Meeting and activity room specifications would need to be tailored to local needs and current building configuration. Figures were estimated for these calculations and recommended floor area will vary greatly depending on specific services to be offered.

According to Profile ID the population for Balmain ward in 2021 was 36,217 ⁶. At June 2020, the Australian Bureau of Statistics listed the Inner West Council with a population of 201,880. At 557 square metres the current Balmain Library would be suitable for a population catchment of approximately 8,000. A larger library is required to provide an adequate space for the Balmain community with a suitably sized collection. The State Library noted during the visit that although Balmain Library is neat and well maintained, accessibility is an issue. The library building is typical of its era with fewer windows than is seen in contemporary design. This along with shelving that is quite high in places makes the library feel dark and crowded. Modifications are required to create a suitably sized, appealing, contemporary library space. Staff are especially disadvantaged in the current library, housed in a very small workroom with a severely inadequate kitchen space. There is no space for staff to sit and eat without disturbing those who are at work, and the toilet facilities are adjacent to the kitchen area. Balmain Library has the potential to expand into currently underutilised indoor and outdoor spaces within the Town Hall precinct.

⁴ Using People Places Population calculator <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/people-places/library-building-calculator>

⁵ Using People Places Services calculator <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/people-places/library-building-calculator>

⁶ Population ID accessed 5 August 2022 <https://profile.id.com.au/inner-west/population?WebID=360>

Accessibility and approach

A library must be open and accessible to the community, promoting equity for people who are young and old, people with prams and people with disabilities.

Areas to be considered include:

- the number of floors in the building
- an easy to find and barrier free entrance
- parking and public transport
- aisle width and corridors to accommodate motorised scooters, people in wheelchairs and prams
- wayfinding and signage.

Accessibility into Balmain Library and within the building is a major issue. The main entry from Darling Street does not have automatic opening doors which reduces accessibility. The accessible entrance at the side is very difficult to navigate and would seem to be impossible to access for someone on their own in a wheelchair or mobility scooter or a carer with a pram. There is limited space in aisles and corridors for clients with access issues to move around easily. Any upgrades to the library building need to ensure improved accessibility into and within the library space.

Layout

A simply laid-out library where the relationship and access between spaces is clear and logical is easier for staff to manage and for customers to use.

Collection development, management, display and circulation remain significant business for public libraries but there have been changes in the way people use their libraries over recent years. This has not only influenced the content of collections, but also the way collections are presented.

Library collections require flexible and logical shelving arrangements, and low height shelving that is accessible and provides sight lines for passive surveillance.

Factors that affect the usability and attractiveness of library collections:

- organisation of the collection
- breaking up densely housed collections with seating, varied geometries and varied mood
- quality and attractiveness of shelving, shelf signage and shelf ends
- ability to display a range of differently proportioned items attractively and with ease
- density of collection (too many books can be overwhelming, and face out books tend to be borrowed more)
- theming of subjects by creating physical 'rooms' for specific subjects, frequently achieved with signage and interior design
- arrangements of shelves and relationship with surrounding furniture and architecture
- mobile shelving is recommended so that spaces can be reconfigured if necessary.

Seating amongst shelves prompts customers to browse the collections, relax and read in situ. Some blocks of seating are necessary for group study and collaborative work, but a range of seating styles is ideal to accommodate a variety of uses and the needs of different library users. Acoustic treatments may be required to ensure that noise from the collaborative spaces does not transfer to quiet areas of the library.

When determining layout, shelving and seating the *People Places service calculator* should be used to allocate an appropriate number of seats and PCs for the catchment population. *Living Learning Libraries*⁷ standards should be used to determine that the collection is of a suitable size. The State Library can assist with using these tools.

Meeting rooms, flexible spaces and quiet study/reading spaces are required in a contemporary library. The addition of outdoor areas adds to the amenity of the building and these spaces are beneficial if needed due to social distancing and ventilation requirements. The State Library recommends that Inner West Council explore the potential for refurbishing the outdoor spaces around the Town Hall to create outdoor library reading and activity rooms.

A major issue with Balmain Library is the lack of visibility of the service desk on entry into the library. A better located service desk will improve the experience for clients and staff. A well laid out library with clear relationships between spaces will also make using the library easier. The library building is restricted by existing room configurations but a good design with clear routes of travel and signage is important. Shelving and seating need to be upgraded to improve the appeal and amenity of the space. A range of seating options in different configurations, included scattered throughout the shelves will allow for a varied use of the collections and spaces.

The children's space includes a deck area that is currently closed off from use. The State Library recommends that this space is upgraded with more solid fencing, shade and furniture to make it a usable part of the children's area, an indoor/outdoor reading space.

The front of the library is dominated by two rooms, one is used as a meeting and activity space and is locked when not in use. The other is open to the public for seating and quiet reading. There is a small room at the back of the library that is labelled a chill-out room targeted at youth. This room is not well used and needs to be reactivated, with a decision to be made as to whether it should be a youth space or available more broadly. Consultation with the public should help determine the best use of the space. It might be suitable as a study, seating or collection space, with flexibility for small group activities.

The Town Hall meeting room is on the ground floor and is currently used for some library events. The room holds up to 60 attendees. Access to this space could be improved to become part of general library space. Flexible furniture such as stackable chairs and folding tables would make it easy to reconfigure the room for different uses, from general daily use to workshops and presentations.

The archives room is above the children's area in a more recent addition to the building. This space is accessible to the public by appointment only. The large theatre space adjacent to the archives is currently tired and dated, with significant accessibility issues. The space is in desperate need of refurbishment. It is underutilised and is a lost opportunity for the library and community.

Flexibility in design and furniture choice

Layout and service requirements change so rapidly that flexibility must be designed and built into a new library space. It is not possible to predict all future community needs but an approach to the design that allows flexibility and adaptability will allow for easier modifications to the function of the library.

⁷ <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/content/living-learning-libraries>

As a community meeting space and cultural hub, a public library offers a range of spaces beyond traditional library services. While frequently the flexibility of the core library space will allow different events to occur by simply moving furniture, library briefs are expanding to accommodate additional spaces where possible.

Furniture and fittings should be attractive, durable and comfortable, and should be selected with the characteristics of the library and customers in mind. A trend towards mobile furniture, which is arranged to create a space or cluster, is an effective way of giving a sense of permanency while also allowing for customers and library staff to re-organise. Furniture selection should allow for individual reading as well as collaborative, social environments.

As mentioned above, the service desk is not well located. It is also very large and feels dated. Small pod style desks, similar to Marrickville Library, provide a contemporary look and function, allowing staff ease of movement to assist library customers.

Technology

Libraries play a key role in providing their community with access to technology. It can be challenging to provide updated technology when refurbishing a heritage listed building but retrofit solutions are available. Balmain Library, as with most libraries of its era, needs to install more power and data points. Strip panels can be added to existing walls to provide access to power. Library furniture suppliers have a range of seating, booth and table options that include power and data connection points. The smaller rooms within the library may be more popular with the community if they are tech enabled, including video conferencing facilities. Consideration should also be given to providing access to video/sound software and equipment for those who need to prepare high quality videos for presentations, job applications and study. Because of the smaller size of Balmain Library, a dedicated video/sound studio is not recommended but software and equipment could be made available to be used in one of the smaller meeting rooms for specific events or on a bookable system, as long as the room was mainly available for library programming, reading and general use. The minimum expectation for a contemporary public library is a good wi-fi connection for those using their own devices, and computers for public access to the internet and library databases. The State Library can make recommendations on the appropriate number of PCs based on the population catchment for Balmain Library, and the State Library's NSW.net service can assist with connectivity advice and subsidy as required.

Public Library Infrastructure Grants

The State Government committed to a record increase of \$60M over four years in public library funding to councils from 2019/20. Part of this funding includes an annual infrastructure grants program of \$6M per year with grants awarded up to a maximum of \$500,000. Applications for the 2022/23 round of Public Library Infrastructure Grants are likely to open in September this year. Because of the smaller size of Balmain Library and the conditions of being in a heritage listed building library, staff are encouraged to talk to the State Library's Public Library Services team if planning to put in a grant application.

The State Library is available to work with Council as plans for the Library and Town Hall precinct progress.

Recommendations

The State Library makes the following recommendations for improvement of Balmain Library:

- Consideration is given to expanding into currently underutilised indoor and outdoor spaces within the Town Hall precinct to provide a larger library with a suitably sized collection. Outdoor spaces can become outdoor library reading and activity rooms.
- Any upgrades to the library ensure improved accessibility into and within the library space.
- The service desk is moved to make it visible and easily accessible on entry into the library. Small pod style desks, similar to Marrickville Library, could be considered.
- A range of seating options in different configurations is provided, allowing for a varied use of the collections and spaces.
- The deck area outside the children's space is upgraded with more solid fencing, shade and furniture to make it a usable part of the children's area, an indoor/outdoor reading space.
- The community is consulted to discuss potential uses of the two small rooms at the front of the library and the chill out room at back of library.
- The Town Hall meeting room access could be upgraded to become part of general library space. Flexible furniture such as stackable chairs and folding tables is purchased to make it easy to reconfigure the room for different uses.
- The large theatre space on the upper level of the Town Hall is refurbished to increase appeal and accessibility.
- Strip panels are added to existing walls to provide access to power. Furniture with built-in power and data connection points is considered. Technology is improved throughout the library space, particularly in the meeting rooms and Town Hall spaces.
- Inner West Library staff talk to the State Library's Public Library Services team if planning to put in a Public Library Infrastructure grant application.