



This brief history of the Surry Hills Branch Library and Neighbourhood Centre has been drawn from an oral history project about the building conducted by the City of Sydney's History Program.

It is the first in a series of publications based on oral history projects about the history of Sydney.

Interviews and text: Margo Beasley.

Cover photograph: Boys learning chess in the Library, late 1970s.
City of Sydney Archives.

Sydney Stories

Surry Hills
Branch Library &
Neighbourhood Centre



city of villages



Detail of the Lloyd Kelemen community mural that adorned the exterior wall of the Surry Hills Library and Neighbourhood Centre building. Photo: Bradley Kendal.

1956 was a big year in Australia: television arrived, the Sydney Opera House competition was announced and Melbourne hosted the Olympic Games.

That year in Surry Hills, a small building was erected to promote community and culture at the local level. Named the Anthony Doherty Community Centre for a Sydney City Council alderman, the building (in recent years known as the Surry Hills Library and Neighbourhood Centre) was divided into two separate spaces: a branch library that faced onto Crown Street, and a hall at the rear which opened onto Norton Street. The library had adult and children's areas, and a mezzanine floor for staff facilities which opened to an accessible and sunny rooftop, enjoyed during lunch breaks. The hall, which later became the Neighbourhood Centre space, had a kitchen, a site for a projector and a stage. The hall was a community recreational resource: for dances, wedding receptions, performances and meetings.

In a low key but consistent way both sections of the building promoted multiple strands of cultural and community life until, increasingly inadequate for twenty-first century requirements, the building was scheduled in 2006 for demolition. It was fifty years old. Richard Francis-Jones, architect of the new multi-purpose Surry Hills Community Centre described the old building as typical, in its modesty, of the post-war period when emphasis was on utility and low cost rather than aesthetics.



Surry Hills was in a poor state when the Anthony Doherty Centre was first built.

Preceding decades had seen residential sections of the inner city suburb disappear under resumptions, demolitions and industrialisation, and the taint of 'slum' was firmly attached to the locality. In the mid 1950s better-heeled working class people were moving to outer suburbs, plans for large-scale public housing were in place, and increasing congestion, pollution and lack of investment left the area unloved and ripe for further destruction of local amenity. But the post-war waves of immigrants that transformed the population makeup of Australia brought an unexpected and life-saving benefit to Surry Hills.

Unaffected by the place's reputation or history, Greeks, Lebanese, Portuguese, Italians and many others bought up and repaired the cheap inner city terraces that characterised the neighbourhood. In so doing they demonstrated the value, longevity, charm and liveability of these formerly derided dwellings.

In the 1970s these immigrants were followed by another influx, this time educated middle class Australians - professionals and students - who abandoned the more far-flung suburbs in search of a more cosmopolitan lifestyle in the increasingly fashionable inner city. Part of the attraction of Surry Hills was its mixed character, and its 'gentrification' has only ever been partial. Today smart restaurants and upmarket residential developments commingle with industrial and commercial zones, public housing high-rise, transient



Exterior of the newly built Surry Hills Library in 1956.
Photo: City of Sydney Archives.

populations of young temporary renters, and many high needs people who are attracted to the inner city because of its proximity to various social services.

Shifts and changes in the services and functions of the Library and Neighbourhood Centre building have evolved in response to permutations in the social makeup of the Surry Hills population and, more broadly, to movements in government policy and economic trends.

While the Library space always remained a library and its core purpose, the provision of books, remained in place, the content of its shelves adjusted to accommodate changing perceptions of library services and user requirements: toys, multi-lingual resources, videos, CDs and DVDs, along with information technology and internet access.

The use of the hall for its original purpose, community recreation of various kinds, declined as fashions in entertainment altered and smarter and more diverse venues became available. By the late 1970s the hall was an underused resource, and it began a

new life as the Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre, an information and resources point for all in the Surry Hills area who needed or wanted to make use of it. Whilst the Council owned the building, the Centre was run by the community-based Management Committee of the Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre Co-operative, which was comprised of volunteers who lived or worked in Surry Hills.

Democratic access is the core philosophical underpinning of both library and neighbourhood centre functions because they provide and promote free access to information and community development, both necessary to participatory citizenship. Former staffers sing the virtues of these services: Elizabeth Maher, once the Children's Librarian for the City of Sydney, says the provision of books in free public libraries is 'one of the great reasons for living'; and John Rule, co-ordinator of the Neighbourhood Centre from 1989 to 1994, says neighbourhood centres provide accommodation for dissenting voices that are often not heard in other places.

In Surry Hills these democratic functions are aided by the strength of the Library and Neighbourhood Centre building's situation. John says the building is surrounded by 'rivers of traffic': Elizabeth, South Dowling, Oxford and Cleveland Streets; but it sits in an accessible oasis of calm opposite Shannon Reserve, a green refuge in an otherwise built up environment. The elderly or infirm, families with small children, and anyone else who seeks to avoid the sensory assault of congested and polluted roadways, can get to the Library and Neighbourhood Centre without hazard. Indeed, for many local patrons the building is an easy, pleasant and very local walk.



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Surry Hills Library reading room c.1960.
Photo: City of Sydney Archives.

The Library

The old library is remembered for its welcoming atmosphere because, with its comfortable chairs, worn carpet and wooden wall-mounted shelving, it felt much like a homely lounge room. Indeed, Bradley Kendal, a Surry Hills librarian, said the room was so 'cosy' and 'club-like' that patrons sitting reading were slightly annoyed if they were asked to move so that books could be re-shelved.

Bradley is an enthusiastic reader and book collector with broad interests in fiction, non-fiction, languages, history and current events. In his opinion, librarians need to have a good general knowledge of the world because they are often asked to recommend reading material to very different kinds of people. What might be appropriate for a fourteen year old boy, such as the Australian writer of young adult fiction Victor Kelleher, might be less suitable for an elderly widow than recent fiction bestsellers, Bradley says.

Claudette Roy, a native French speaker who arrived in Australia from Montreal, Canada, some decades ago, has been visiting the Surry Hills Branch Library since she moved into her nearby stone cottage in 1977. At other libraries she felt like 'a number' because they didn't provide the same friendly and personalised service that she benefited from at Surry Hills. Claudette is a borrower of news magazines such as *Time* and *The Bulletin*, occasional videos and DVDs, and has always been a keen reader of murder, mystery and suspense novels, especially those of John Grisham and Kathy Reichs.



The staff at the Surry Hills Branch Library were extremely friendly and helpful, she says. They knew well her personal interests - world architecture, home decorating and watercolour painting - and they kept an eye out for books that would interest her. Claudette found that reading became an even greater part of her life after retirement a few years ago and the local library is an invaluable resource. She had little storage space in her tiny house, and she could also borrow and read material that would otherwise be inaccessible because of its cost.

The library 'has been very good for me' she said. It saved space, it saved money and 'you talk to people' she added. 'It makes a big difference, it's a social thing.'

Unlike other branch libraries in the City of Sydney network, such as Kings Cross and Haymarket, the Surry Hills Branch Library developed with a special focus on children's services because of the number of children in the area. Elizabeth Maher recalls the Surry Hills library performed many educative functions for school groups before the expansion of school libraries in the 1970s under the Whitlam Government. Although smaller numbers of school groups from nearby Crown Street and Bourke Street public schools continued to visit after that time, children's activities became more strongly focused on pre-school children and playgroups, with weekly story time a particular and enduring favourite. The Library also featured special occasion activities for these and older children,

including candle making, magicians, school holiday programs, book week and events for calendar days such as Easter and Christmas.

An innovation at Surry Hills was the development of a toy library in the 1980s, which posed various logistical difficulties for storage, tagging and presentation. Toys are a vital developmental necessity, however, Elizabeth argues, because play is essential to learning about hand/eye coordination, motor skills, sharing, imagination and, most important of all, joy. Elizabeth says play is the foundation for a prime purpose of libraries: a love of learning throughout life.

Surry Hills children from various non-English speaking backgrounds were recipients of special services in the library. In the 1970s local community activist Enid Cook was involved in promoting educational assistance for migrant children, especially those who came from areas where illiteracy levels were high. She had strong support from the library and was able to acquire funding for professional multi-lingual assistance for reading and homework classes from the Whitlam government.

As the cultural mix has changed in Surry Hills, so have resources provided by the library. One joint project with the State Library established a multi-cultural storytelling program which was conducted both in English and another language by (mainly) older retired women. The women were taught bi-lingual storytelling skills, so that they could tell the story in their own language and then mirror it effectively in English. Children from different language groups benefited but so also did the women because they developed presentation skills and confidence.



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A 1976 fashion parade celebrating the Library's 20th birthday.
Photo: City of Sydney Archives.

Much of the multi-lingual material held by the library was aimed at adults. Parents and grandparents struggling with English could read familiar children's books to their offspring in their native language, aiding intergenerational relationships. Other multi-lingual materials such as adult fiction, newspapers and DVDs were also keenly received. In recent years Russian and Spanish collections developed, reflecting immigration trends from the former Soviet Union and South America.

The focus and functions of libraries have changed in recent decades.

Once seen as places of silence for scholarly study they are now more relaxed but also more complex spaces. Elizabeth Maher says the current philosophy is that libraries are places for recreation, light reading, play, meeting friends, doing homework and somewhere to just be. But they also remain places for the acquisition of information, the delivery of which has been much revolutionised by digital technology. This has meant the provision of computers and internet access have become increasingly important standard services. Ruth Champion, an avid newspaper reader and Surry Hills Library user, argues that internet access should be a key function of all libraries because it democratises information for people who are too poor to pay monthly access fees. Access to the internet is 'really, really important for people who have been marginalised' Ruth says.



The Neighbourhood Centre



Photograph of Coral Dasey (centre) with her parents at her 21st birthday party in the hall at the rear of the Surry Hills Library.

Although marginalised people, or any people with high needs, have been a focus of the Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre since it began functioning in the old hall in the late 1970s, in its earlier incarnation as a community recreational hall it was often used for one-off celebrations. Typical was Coral Dasey's 21st birthday party in 1960. The hall was chosen above others because of its size, its relative newness and its stage, the latter a necessary prerequisite because not only was a three piece dance band hired for the occasion, but Coral and her father were both keen performers and professional composers of country music. A cousin of Coral's decorated the hall and its tables with balloons, streamers and flowers. Food and drink, organised by an aunt and uncle, was typical of the time: sandwiches, sausage rolls, cocktail frankfurts, chips, nuts, lollies, savoury biscuits, sponge cakes, beer and soft drinks. Coral's parents gave her a gold marcasite watch, a traditional twenty first birthday gift, and her father presented her with an oversized gold key, a conventional token symbolic of the opening the door to life that the age of twenty one represented. At that time it was the age at which people could first vote.



Lloyd Kelemen community mural which adorned the Collins Street side of the Surry Hills Library and Neighbourhood Centre building. Photo: Bradley Kendal.

Around the time that the hall underwent formal transition to the home of the Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre in the late seventies, similar organisations were also emerging elsewhere in inner city Sydney and other urban centres around the world that were undergoing the same processes, because of a general rise in resident action around local politics and social issues. Such community organisations were also encouraged by government organisational support, which assisted local people who were using services to be involved in planning and administering them along with governments, charities and businesses.

Enid Cook recalled that in the 1970s, for instance, there was growing concern about the availability of children's services as young people who had moved into Surry Hills had families, and young mothers increasingly rejoined the workforce. Playgroups and various forms of childcare rapidly became significant. Enid says that 'children are the most important group to support because through them you support a family, [and] you support a school'. The Neighbourhood Centre provided space and staff for some children's services such as occasional care, and coordinated others, such as before and after school care and vacation care, that took place in other venues.

Some problems took everyone by surprise. Because of its high gay population, Surry Hills was hit very hard, very rapidly, by the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. Enid remembered that when it struck 'we did as much as we could, and the horror of it, young men, smart, well-educated, everything, just went down'. There was 'a sudden and critical need for services for sick and dying people' John Rule recalled, but fear and misinformation about the disease compounded institutional unpreparedness. The Neighbourhood Centre was instrumental in calling attention to local needs for people living with HIV AIDS and in

bringing in various agencies, Homecare in particular, to assist them.

The 1980s and '90s were demanding years for the Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre for a host of different reasons. Enid cited the increasing prevalence of mental illness, drugs, violence, partnership breakdown, and conflict between various cultural groups as impacting on life in Surry Hills; all troubles to do with 'the changing society that Sydney was living through', she says.

Developmental pressure and government policy often intensified social problems. John recalled that there was little concern for social justice issues, for instance, in the leadup to the Bicentennial year, 1988, and the large-scale transport infrastructure - tunnels, freeways, flyovers - that was needed to support development but would have negative impacts on life in the inner city. In the 1990s homeless people were encouraged away from Surry Hills under the economic rationalist philosophies of the federal Labor government but they returned anyway, to better access services and support. The Neighbourhood Centre played a brokering role between the community and the various agencies involved: government, planners, business, and charities.

It is part of the Neighbourhood Centre's charter to support people with high needs, and this especially refers to public housing tenants, of whom there are many in Surry Hills. The most visible aspect of local public housing is the Northcott Centre in Belvoir St. With assistance and support from the Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre, the people of Northcott established their own Neighbourhood Centre for a time in a community room in their building. The Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre continues to be actively involved with



Northcott tenants on various levels, including running support groups for people with mental health and other problems.

The monthly Surry Hills community markets that operate out of Shannon Reserve were and remain a highly visible Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre project. In pre-internet days the markets were a focal point for information on social services and local politics as much as a venue for low cost and 'pre-loved' goods. And the hall was in constant use by all sorts of community groups: for martial arts and belly dancing classes, for multi-cultural cooking, language and walking groups, and for support groups such as Narcotics Anonymous. Like the Library, the Neighbourhood Centre has had to deal with changes in the way that information is delivered. Where once a new print room for roneoing and photocopying marked a communications advance, provision of computers and internet connection is now essential to disseminate information and facilitate access for those unable to pay for it.

This painting titled 'Late Summer', by Lithuanian born painter Eva Kubbos, hung for many years in the old Surry Hills Branch Library. No-one, including Eva, knows how the painting came to be there, but it was probably donated to the library by a patron. The picture is painted in watercolour and gouache and its subject is an abstracted landscape dominated by a massive glowing sun and cut by vertical and horizontal lines indicating the earth, sky and horizon. Eva, who came to Australia as a displaced person after World War II, painted in the emotional, spatial and stylistic freedom of the abstract expressionist style. After growing up with long, dark European winters she was profoundly influenced by the open space, sky and shining sun of the Australian landscape, to which she was first exposed at the Bonegilla Migrant Camp. The Australian landscape remains her primary inspiration.



Richard Francis-Jones



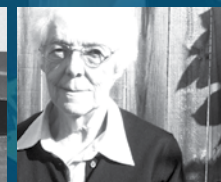
Eva Kubbos



Claudette Roy



John Rule



Enid Cook



Bradley Kendal



Ruth Champion



Elizabeth Maher



Coral Dasey

Thanks are due to the participants in the Surry Hills Branch Library and Neighbourhood Centre Oral History Project, pictured above.

Richard Francis-Jones photo: Fjmt Architecture.
John Rule photo: National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS Australia.
Ruth Champion photo: Bradley Kendal. Other photos: Margo Beasley.