

# THE READER-CENTRED PROFESSIONAL ASSIGNMENT

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## **Assignment Module Four: Trailblaze change in the library space**

### **Redesigning East Melbourne Library**

#### **Overview**

In 2015 an OHS audit highlighted several health and safety issues to do with manual handling and material processing which provided an opportunity to rethink the library space at East Melbourne Library. Processing of library material was performed in the main library space behind a very large customer service desk.

Without going into details about the specific OHS issues the impact to customer service was:

- large customer service desk encouraged clutter
- staff equipment and storage was untidy and felt neglected
- redundant staff equipment and supplies accumulated
- created a sense of staff space and customer space with the customer service desk being a clear dividing line
- took up a huge amount of prime real estate in the library space
- first impression as you walked into the building was staff workspace
- staff very often had their back to customers
- having a staff congregation space encouraged staff to chat and sometimes neglect the customer

Having identified these issues I felt as we were going to receive funding to fix our OHS issues it would be an ideal opportunity to develop a customer centric service model and take the chance to create a more reader focused environment for our customers. Having observed the behaviour of our customers over time it was clear there were certain behaviours which they favoured while visiting the library. These were:

- quiet reading
- sitting
- using personal devices like laptops and ipads
- studying including taking notes and writing
- searching for resources
- dropping off loaned material
- picking up loaned material
- asking staff for help
- looking for staff contact even just a greeting
- printing and using the copy station
- using public PCs
- browsing the collection
- attending programs like children's story times

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Some of these activities were quick being in the few minutes category while others involved spending hours, even the whole day in the library. As part of my rethink I wanted to ensure that our renovations would complement and encourage these behaviours. It made me aware that much of our old set-up actually contributed to hindering the preferred behaviour of our customers.

## **Getting started – act like a customer**

Working in the library space staff can often fall into two mental places. We can go through the motions and continue activities without applied mental engagement or we can observe our own behaviour and the customers to ascertain how people are interacting with the space objectively. It's like having different perspectives, we can chose to remain in our own perspective or we can hop outside ourselves and view situations from other perspectives to try and identify how someone else is experiencing the space. Both perspectives are important but it's often the customer view which gets missed in library refurbishments.

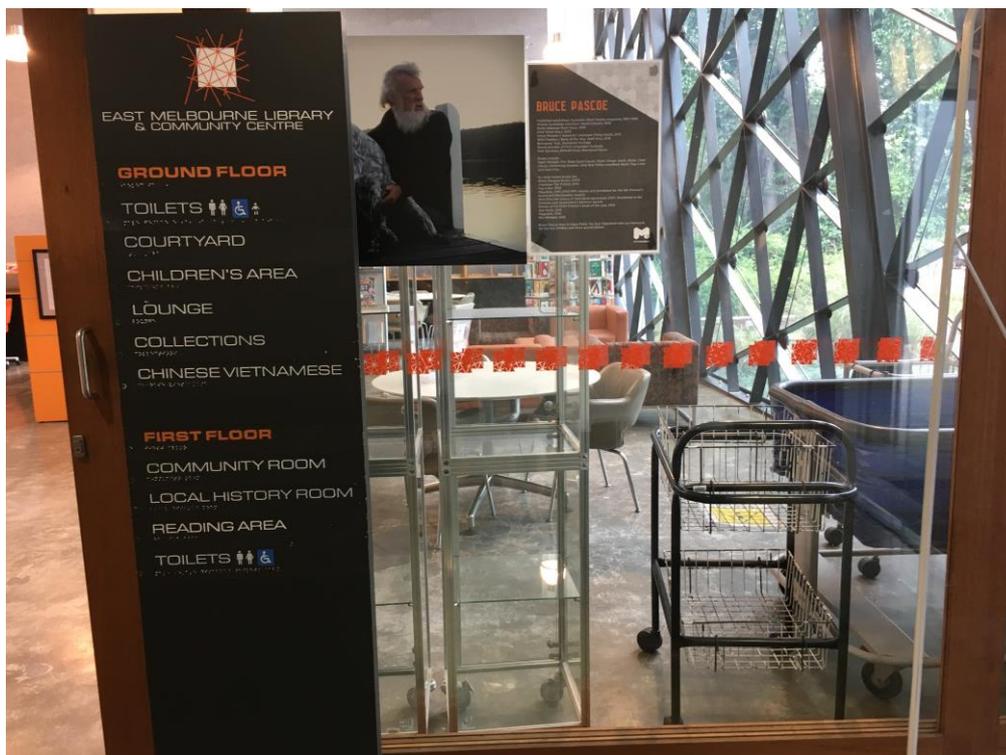
What I did was to get staff to discuss their observations and almost dream about the perfect set-up. Fortunately having a year or two between applying for funding and receiving funding gave me and my team time to collect a lot of ideas about the change. Having time to do this process was probably a luxury but very useful because it contributed to an evolutionary process of ideas with ample time for refinement.

To follow through I decided to create a document to capture these thoughts and solutions which staff were invited to add too including photos of things they were seeing. This process then created a scenario where staff had an opportunity to feel totally engaged in the project. We discussed issues and problems at staff meetings. I then developed this ideas document into a full scale planning document which was critical for the contributing to the architects brief about what we were trying to achieve with the refurbishment and ultimately the project's success.

So when it came time to meet with the design team not only did we have a refined document with clear objectives for them to start with, I had a team of staff who were fully invested and even passionate about the project. No-one in the group felt their contribution had no weight and the architects team at City Design felt fully informed about the project and knew clearly what our issues were and what we were trying to achieve with the refurbishment.

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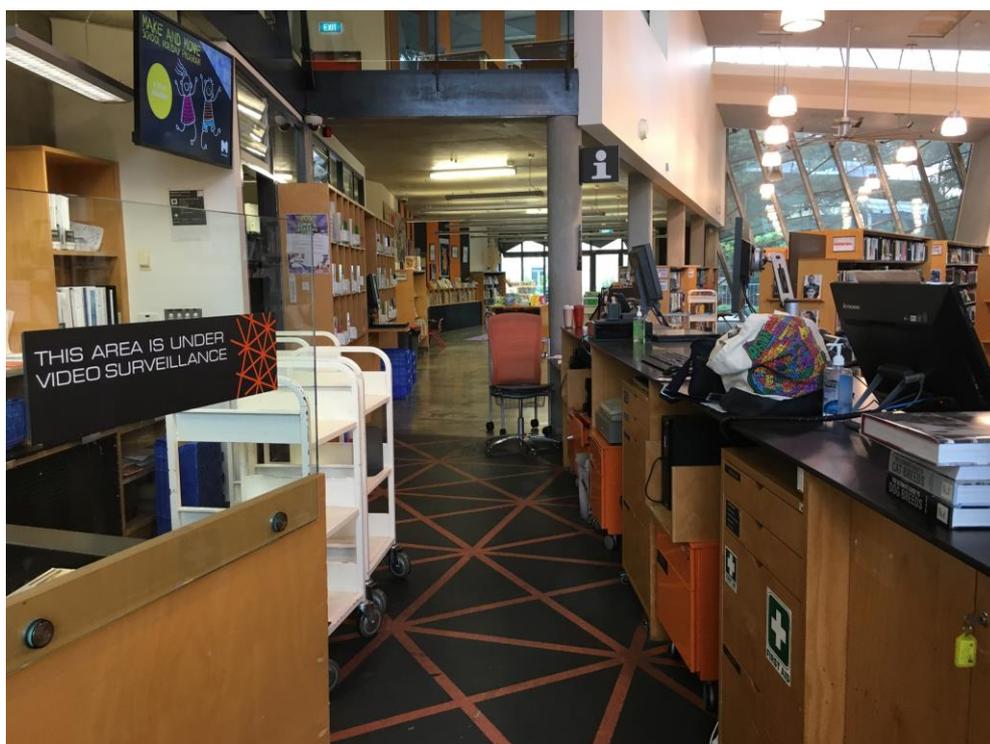
## The Library pre-renovations



East Melbourne Library Foyer Entrance

- Cluttered with display storage, trolleys and oversized overnight returns bin
- Visually noisy and confused

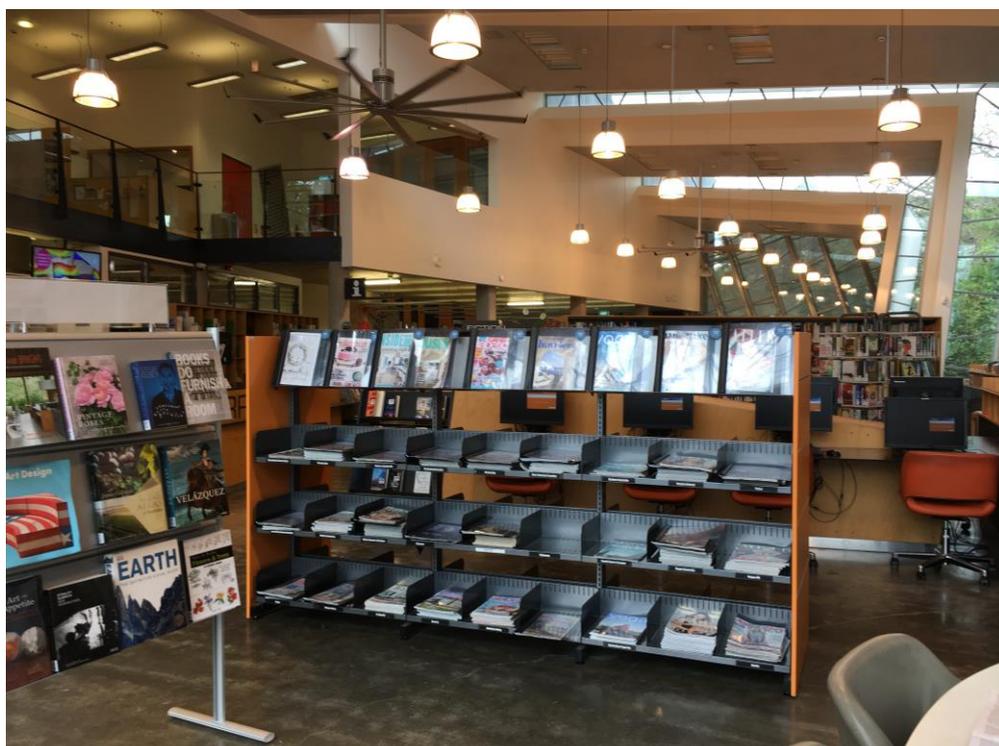
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East Melbourne Library Entry

- What you see when you enter the library – back of customer service desk
- Obstructed walk flow
- Behind the desk clearly visible

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Reading area and magazine displays

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Customer service model:

- Large desk forming a barrier between customer and staff
- Lots of clutter from multi-purpose set-up including staff PCs, OPAC, information stands, display top up
- Line of sight to item return processing, crates to other branches, staff papers & folders
- Outdated sign as borrowing was encouraged to self-check PCs

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## Creating a customer-focused reader-centric space

Aside from addressing our OHS issues one of our opportunities was to create a more reader-centric library space. We observed the behaviour of our customers and staff interactions. I found that one of the reoccurring uses of the library was that customers were wanting to stay in the library space for long periods of time to socialise, read, work and study but experience several impediments to this behaviour.

- We had small crowded reading tables with very heavy chairs
- We only had two designated spaces cramped into the front of the library
- People were having to use devices, study, write and read on top of one another which caused conflict if one activity disrupted the other
- No sockets for device charging cause cables to be strewn across the floor creating potential tripping hazards. No amount of staff supervision could curb this behaviour because devices go flat and need charging.
- Uncomfortable chairs, too low for older people to climb in and out of
- Minimal table space
- Uninspiring magazine shelving taking up valuable library space in the front of the library
- Displays were cluttered and squeezed into an already cluttered library space
- Customers had to approach staff in a formalised way
- Opportunities for spontaneous conversations between staff and customers and customers with customers was minimal
- Staff tended to stay behind the large front counter rather than circulate in the library space
- Library layout meant that people could duck in and return items without seeing collection or displays reducing our opportunity to promote our collections

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## After



From this picture you can see the amount of open space we were able to create by rethinking our collection shelving

We were able to reorientate the bank of public PCs with a dividing wall with eye level monitor for promotion of library services including events, book groups, book promotions etc. We often move promotional collection displays against this wall as this is the first line of sight customers have when entering the library. Customers using the public PCs now have a sense of privacy and we have noticed they stay much longer using the PCs.

We also succeeded in creating different zones, you will see on the right we have comfortable single seating reading chairs with displays and on the left you will notice a large 10 seater community table where people can use laptops, read, write or do crosswords etc.

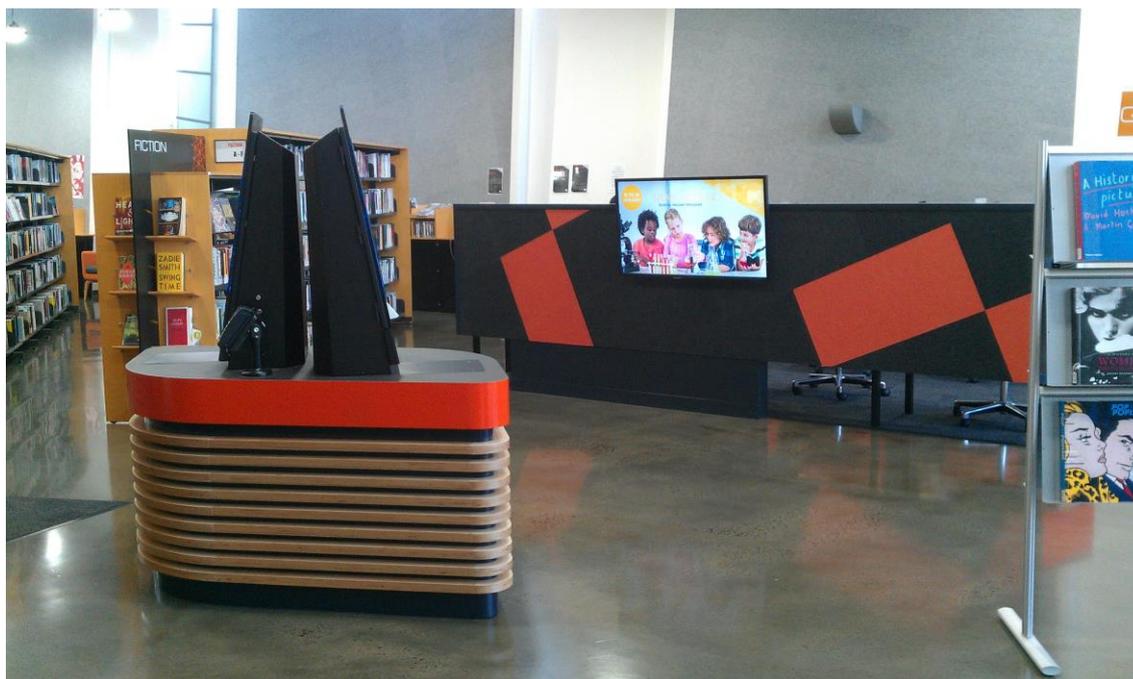
What I love best is the sense of uncluttered space where it's easy to navigate where you want to go without visual or physical obstruction.

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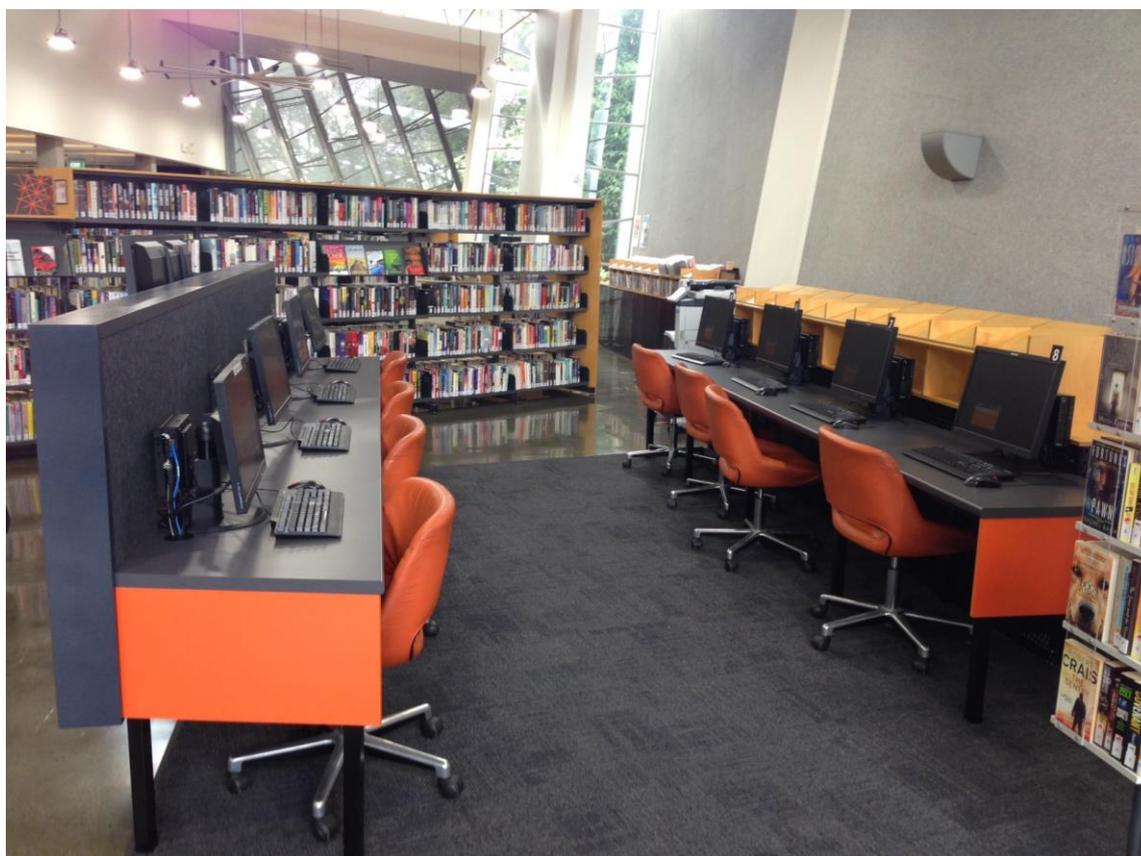


Much more aesthetic and enticing magazine displays (our loans have increased substantially)

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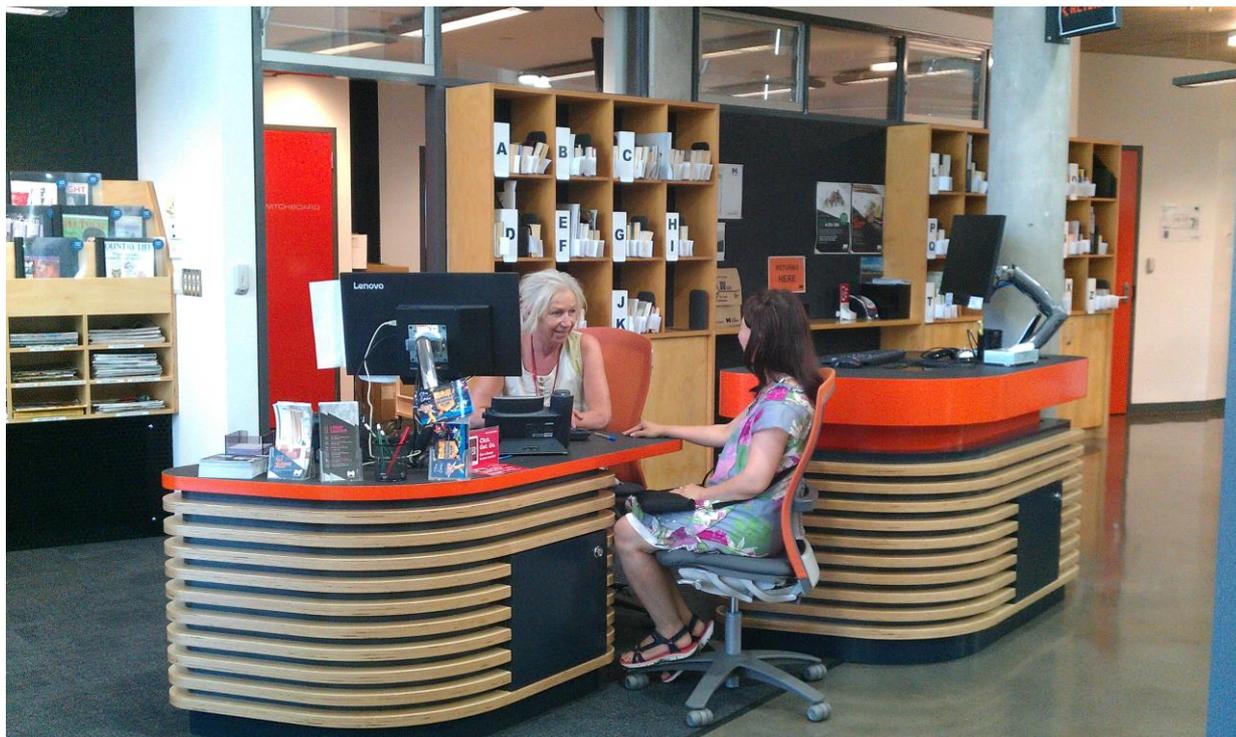


Self-check pod with digital display screen and partition which screens the public computers

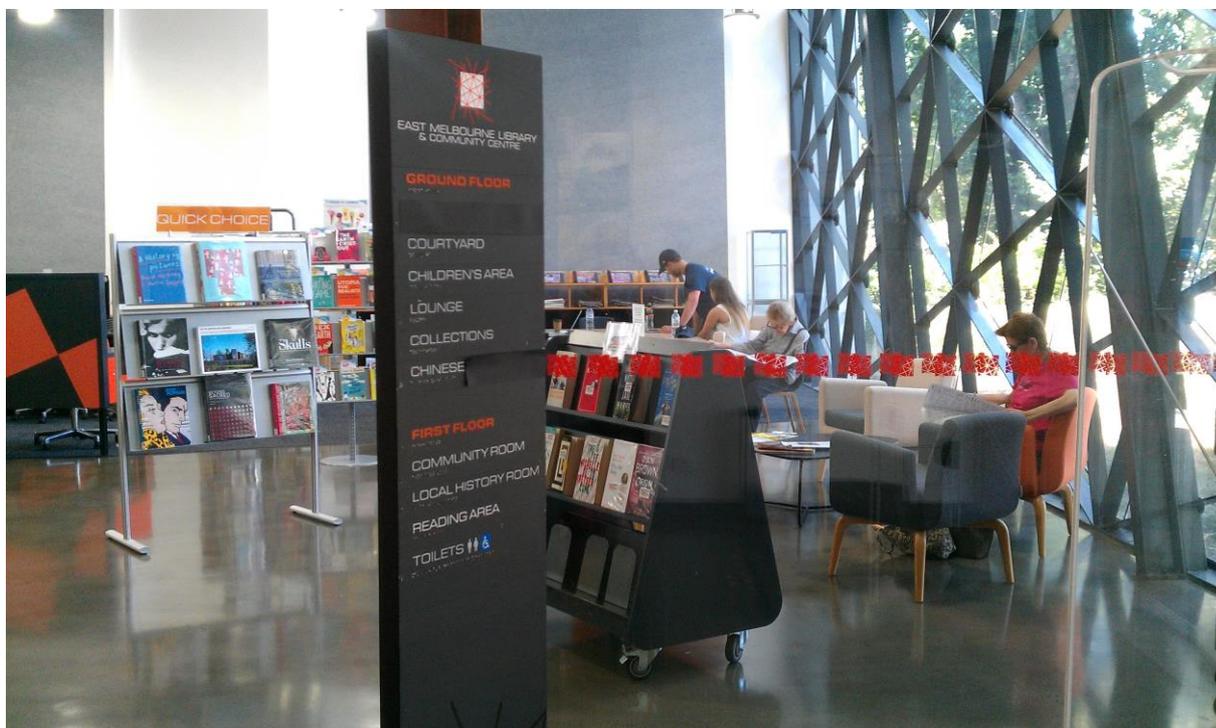


Privacy and plenty of space for public PC use means people have a better sense of privacy, stay longer and read more

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The new staff pods are much less of a barrier between the customer and the staff member. Customers feel like they can sit down and chat to staff freely and comfortably



This is the view that greets you when you enter the library. Clear, uncluttered, relaxed, with lots of reader-centric displays.

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Displays can be given a prominent space in high traffic areas. This is our quick choice display.

Foot traffic from the library entrance to the returns chute, holds shelf and computers is surrounded by lovely customised displays and encourage borrowing.

These display units being on wheels means we have the flexibility to move displays to any position in the library.

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## What we achieved

- We created a reader-centric customer experience which encourages people to stay in the library
- Staff greet people as they enter the library because of the orientation of the pods. They provide the customer with an opportunity to ask for help or directions without feeling like they are imposing.
- It creates a friendly library where staff and customers can greet one another and spontaneously chat
- Customers are staying in the library longer and giving us positive feedback about the library space and staff service
- People are reading with enjoyment in the library
- People chat to staff about the books they are returning and giving verbal reviews to staff but also each other.
- Loans for magazines and reader-centred displays have increased
- We increased our customer foot traffic into the library by only opening the external returns chute after hours and placing the returns slot further into the library making the customer walk past beautiful magazine displays, book displays.

## Things to note

Changing customer and staff behaviour and their interaction to space can be tricky. There was extreme excitement with the refurbishment when the library re-opened because of the new look, the freshness of feeling, the new layout and the new furniture.

Staff took a little while to get used to some significant changes to foot traffic. This being the returns chute further into the library. They regularly had to direct the customer to the returns area. This caused a little bit of frustration with answering the same question over and over when we first opened. There were a couple of contributing factors in this. One was that the signage needed updating and two because we had always left the external chute open which was convenient for the customer. It was a significant workflow change. The good news is that 6 months down the track our regular customers are adjusted to the change and get to see book displays and chat to staff about the books they are returning giving us spontaneous reviews. They walk past our new magazine display and the result is that magazine borrowing has increased exponentially. Our displays work so much better, so for the tiny bit of behavioural adjustment the results are worth it.

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## Feedback from our Customers

*We love this library.. beautiful building & unbelievably helpful staff – thankyou 🙄 Anon*

*Amazing work!!!! – Anon*

*So cool, but still friendly – G. Sussex*

*Lovely reading and community atmosphere 💙 Taylor & Dan*

*More spacious, like the layout & great furniture – Lizzie C*

*We couldn't wait to see and we couldn't have been happier.. well done – Natalia*

*Great new look, more organised collections and great new woodmark furniture! 🙄*

*I like the new style arrangement with the furniture, it is great – T.V.*

*Love the newlook East Mel Library – very New York! – Christina Feely*

*Wonderful – S Louis*

*Excellent improves the ambience and amenity – L. Wilkie*

*So happy to come back to this library again – Jenny*

*Great to have you back. Missed you. Looks good, nice sense of space - Vicky Tiaconas*

*Looks good – very Scandi & open – Sue Nicholson*

*Lovely, light, inviting space – too hard to walk by! Keep up the floral arrangement - T Keogh*

*I think the location of the new computer area and big reading desk is a good idea – bright accessible spot near the entrance – Liz V*

*This is a marvellous refurbishment to bring in line with current refinement - Wan*