CREATING THE THIRD PLACE: MEASURING THE SUCCESS OF COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

EXCELLENCE AWARD

Kelly Neill, Principal Project Manager Toowoomba

The Toowoomba City Library and Civic Square (winner of the 2016 IPWEAQ project over $10M) recently celebrated its 1st birthday. The distinctive 6,800m² copper clad building, delivered over three levels, includes a new library, community meeting rooms, cycle centre, and basement car park. The Civic Square includes formalised plaza spaces, passive recreation areas, a large central lawn and strong pedestrian connections to the broader CBD.

As well as finalising all the project management requirements, the 1 year anniversary has also provided an opportunity to reflect on project outcomes. Nick Hauser, Toowoomba Regional Council’s General Manager Environment and Community Services said “project delivery was successful using all the standard project measures, we were on time, under budget and stakeholders were fully engaged and thrilled with the outcome. And now that it’s finished, the project’s success as an urban renewal project is obvious: it has transformed an unsealed car-park into an iconic building and high-use community hub”.

Certainly on the community acceptance measure, the numbers show that the Toowoomba Region community has embraced the project: literally voting with their feet! Over 5,000 community members visited the Library on the opening weekend alone, and the building has clocked up over 400,000 visitors in the first year. The community meeting room bookings have increased 20% month on month, and the Civic Square has hosted movie nights, markets, live music events and has even hosted super heroes.
The project is also continuing to receive industry praise, winning excellence awards from IPWEAQ, Master Builders, and Architects Association of Australia. But the benefits of this project and indeed all community infrastructure projects, extend beyond the measurable levels of attendance, community feedback and industry accolades, and include the role public places play in the development of communities.

Around the world, community infrastructure is increasingly being regarded as a “third place”. Stemming from Ray Oldenburg’s influential book The Great Good Place, with the “first place” seen as people’s home, “second place” as the workplace, the “third place” are community spaces that are anchors of community life, that facilitate and foster broader, more creative interaction. Within this context, the benefits of well-planned and well-executed social infrastructure extend to the pivotal role communal meeting places play in the intrinsic development of networks and social interaction within our community.

“Walking through the building and civic square on any given day you will see not just people reading and borrowing books, but a community in action. Whether that’s chess matches between individuals, meetings of community groups, children playing on the central lawn, English conversation groups, story-time under the tree, or colleagues from the adjacent office buildings having an informal meeting in the café. It’s the project’s role in creating places for these interactions that shows that the project’s real success is in contributing to the social fabric of our community” Nick Hauser said.

The commitment to creating a “third place” was a strong theme for the project from the beginning and continues now in the ongoing management of the facility and the broader precinct. The project team set out to meet both the well-defined “functional” requirements of a Library, Civic Square and community meeting rooms, but also to deliver the less tangible aim of strengthening networks within our community.
Community and library users were engaged at each stage of the project where they were invited to: pitch ideas for inclusion in the building or civic square; comment on preliminary design sketches; and review 3D fly-through and artist impressions. Community art projects were used very effectively as an engagement strategy, getting hands-on involvement from community members. The use of enquiry-by-design approaches, ensuring a multi-disciplinary approach to the design, peer and external reviews at key design points and utilising 3D and spatial design tools to ensure understanding, all contributed to a well-considered approach to a complex list of requirements.

The resultant design has created a bold built form within the Toowoomba landscape, easily recognisable and navigable. The building and the civic square with its mix of formal and informal spaces, the seamless transition from internal and external areas allows for both structured and spontaneous gatherings. Council’s proactive management of the precinct as an event space maintains the energy and freshness of the area, bringing frequent visitors back and constantly reaching out to new audiences.

Certainly our results against the tangible measures look good on the score card and the “vibe” of the building and how it is being used each day suggests we have been successful in creating a much-loved space. But it will be the building’s role in the day-to-day lives of our community members that will determine if we have created a worthy third place, an “anchor of community life that facilitates and fosters broader, more creative interaction”.