

**Today, as we build a whole new generation of cultural facilities around Australia, the buzz word – and de facto government policy – seems to be ‘convergence’.**

It’s a word that means a lot more than simply co-locating individual cultural facilities. Convergence is about the active hybridization of programming, staffing and services of normally stand-alone facilities and art forms.



by KEVIN WILSON

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**IN ALBURY WE STARTED OUT PHYSICALLY CONVERGING OUR library and museum into a new building but we have moved further into attempting to converge all the cultural facilities in our cultural precinct, including the Regional Art Gallery and the Convention and Performing Arts Centre. We are still only part of the way along that journey but the challenges have already been immense; none more so than in the staffing area where we have removed facility director positions, created more generic positions to cover all facilities, such as programs team leader and operations team leader and regularly move around our frontline staff to different facilities.**

One cannot help going back to the basics and asking whether our audiences want or are prepared for such change, or indeed whether we can or should change our audience’s habits anyway. Then there is the hoary question of how much participation our audiences have in the development and management of the facilities, because if you are talking about converging all elements of cultural facilities then isn’t the audience one of those elements?

At this stage the real challenge of convergence for me is in the exhibition/display area. Museum and gallery spaces have very entrenched concepts of how space should be used and it revolves around a presentation format that allows you to look and occasionally touch and very rarely to leave any trace of your visit. Of course we are getting better at intellectual access by providing greater and more accessible information in and outside the exhibition space to a wider audience but its capacity is limited

when the first barrier to active participation is the very arrangement of space itself. I am talking here specifically about a kind of culture of space *i.e.*, how we live in, use, navigate and pass through space and also about our cultural heritage — our expectations of exhibitions based on a history of exhibition practice.

The way we design our spaces provides a good indication of our culture and the class structure of our society. We talk a lot about softening or familiarizing our cultural spaces *e.g.*, by adding shops and cafés into art galleries and museums, even though simply adding such a facility will not necessary make a major difference to our audiences — we all know that even in the commercial sphere shops themselves are stratified towards different audiences. Spaces like libraries, which are much more socially accessible than other cultural spaces, are now adding cafés right into the midst of their book stocks rather than at the edges of the building. Users are encouraged to sit with food and coffee and read.

## it’s a library,



*Under construction: Albury City’s new Library Museum, at the forefront of the trend in cultural facilities convergence*

### June

8 – 11 June

👁️ **PEAK HILL** Arts & Crafts Exhibition  
Stalls and demos showing local and district work: patchwork, pottery, woodwork, spinning, sweet making, jewellery, Leisure Ctre, Newell Hwy Tel 02 6862 4365

9 June – 17 July

👁️ *Making Faces* An exhibition featuring regional artists working in diverse ways with and around ‘the face’.  
**BEGA** Valley Regional Gallery  
Tel 02 6499 2187

11 – 13 June

👁️ *Pacific Palms Art Festival* 15th annual art exhibition and sale of works by renowned and emerging artists. Opens Friday by ticket inc supper. **PACIFIC PALMS** Community Ctr Tel 02 6554 0249

13 – 17 June

🎬 *Snowyfest International Film Festival* Over 60 Short and Feature Films, Acting Workshops and Seminars.  
**THREDBO** Village, Tel 02 6459 4108  
Website [www.snowyfest.com](http://www.snowyfest.com)

So what happens when you join a library and a museum together? Do people simply identify the library section or the museum section and revert to their normal spatial habits? Do they, in the case of the library, go and get a book or CD, relax in a comfy chair and chat to the person next to them or the parents of other children using the space or do they go into the museum space and walk quietly through it and follow the narrative of the exhibition?

Can you combine these spaces in ways that challenge or enhance those habits? In the book/CD zone is it possible to add a greater sense of the visual and the ability to touch objects and to use exhibition techniques to enhance the themes of the book stock? Some libraries have added into their shelving display cases or pull-out museum drawers that house objects related to the books, but once the novelty has worn off do these display ideas merely become decorative or no different to the occasional small travelling exhibition set up in a left-over space in the library?

## it's a museum

In new merged or hybrid zones, such as knowledge centres or 'info zones' in either libraries or museums which combine information technology, museum display and traditional book stock, people are still 'targeting' elements of those spaces (such as the free internet) and not taking advantage of other interactive elements (such as specimen display drawers). Are we being utopian to believe that we can easily change a person's normal way of doing things or navigating and using space?

Libraries are in a sense already over-determined in trying to provide for a broad range of users. They are in the forefront of change with both new technology and the reintroduction of the physical human presence with living books and reader-in-residence programs.

How can the social interactivity of the library translate into the museum space? In many ways it means that we have to stop relying on the standard touring exhibitions that we get from our national institutions (particularly the exhibitions that are glorified display boards that deal with social and historical issues with a little bit of interactivity added). We need new kinds of exhibitions that allow greater interactivity, a greater sense of cultural comfort.

In our case we have been exploring the idea of adding yet another element into the library zone: that of the living room

### AlburyCity Library | Museum key facts

- The first contemporary piece of public architecture in Albury for over 40 years
- Architects: Ashton, Raggatt & McDougall, designers of the National Museum of Australia.
- Cost: \$14m including land acquisition, demolition, archaeological and service relocation costs.
- Additional costs: \$1m fitout and IT plus \$1m for a semi-permanent exhibition on the history of Albury
- Features an impressive façade design based on the famous metal cross structure on the Murray River rail bridge linking Victoria and NSW.
- Environmental features: stormwater use in toilets; high performance solar glazing; water efficient landscaping.
- Total floorspace: 2800m<sup>2</sup> museum + library sections
- Building commenced January 2006
- Opens 28 July 2007

concept i.e., recreated rooms — historical or contemporary, private or public — that include both objects and books, music; a totally recreated space that offers various clues about our culture. This has proved difficult due to the lack of space in the library. But again we have fallen into the trap of pushing the library envelope when we should be pushing the exhibition space. There is absolutely no reason why we should not create these kinds of living rooms in our exhibition spaces.

This is just one example of how we are exploring and engaging with convergence. We still do not know if it will work. It will depend on our audiences. Nothing is set in concrete and nor should it be. ■

**Kevin Wilson is the Group Leader of Cultural Services (and former art gallery director) at AlburyCity Council.**



Interested in this topic? The latest Museums & Galleries NSW quarterly magazine, *The MAG*, has a special focus on convergence, including articles on the Tamworth Regional Gallery & Library, the Manly Art Gallery & Museum and the integration of cultural complexes in Western Sydney as well as the AlburyCity Library Museum. Download a copy from the MGNSW website at [www.mgnsw.org.au](http://www.mgnsw.org.au).

## June

Until 17 June

👁️ *Lawson-Menzies Indigenous Masterworks Collection* Works from the auction houses extensive collection. Tweed River Art Gallery, **MURWILLUMBAH**  
Tel 02 6670 2790 Website  
[www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/artgallery](http://www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/artgallery)

19 – 24 June

📖 *Philosophy, Science & Theology Festival* Seven world class keynote speakers share their knowledge. **GRAFTON**  
Tel 02 6642 8684  
Website [www.pstf.com.au](http://www.pstf.com.au)

21 – 23 June

🎭 *True Stories* Two new works presented by Bangarra Dance Theatre. \$45/\$36 IPAC, **WOLLONGONG**  
Tel 02 4226 3366  
Website [www.ipac.org.au](http://www.ipac.org.au)

21 June – 12 August

👁️ *Operation Art* Annual touring exhibition of paintings by schoolchildren across NSW. Tweed River Art Gallery, **MURWILLUMBAH** Tel 02 6670 2790  
Website [www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/artgallery](http://www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/artgallery)