Jump up on the cart! Charrettes for participatory library designing in LIS education

Abstract:

Environment (physical, virtual and sensory) is known to influence the ways people interact and learn in particular contexts, including libraries. It is therefore important to ensure that all stakeholders' perspectives are represented in the design of new and refurbished library facilities. A powerful means to achieve active stakeholder consultation is the charrette participatory design approach. A charrette (French for 'little cart') supports consensus-led creation of spaces that respond to the expectations and needs of the particular user community. Community members act as 'vernacular' designers (or interested lay people) to generate conceptual design proposals. These can then inform the work of professional architects and professional designers charged with realising a user-responsive built space. In a library context, a charrette can give voice to a wide range of library stakeholders (staff and public). In LIS education, the charrette process provides a problem-based learning approach that fosters critical and creative engagement with design principles and practices. In this way, LIS graduates are empowered to address public and school library standards that call for the creation of user-friendly spaces.

This paper draws on my ongoing research and teaching about the use of charrettes for designing library learning spaces. To provide historical and theoretical background, the paper briefly outlines the origins of the charrette process and its grounding in values-based design theory. This discussion is illustrated by examples of a charrette applied to real-life library designing. The paper then focuses on the charrette approach that I have adopted for the MEd unit Designing Spaces for Learning that I teach at QUT. I explain how students use a charrette to identify and address learning space design problems in a library that they work in or know well. With reference to students' reflective narrative, I outline their charrette experience in a range of public and school library settings. Some teacher-librarians even extend the charrette process into their own teaching. These evidence-based snapshots provide a basis for evaluating the strengths and challenges of the charrette process. I argue that giving library stakeholders a voice enables the creation of inclusive, fit-for-contemporary-purpose libraries; and that ultimately this enables cost-effective outcomes new and refurbished library building projects. The findings are of potential interest to library mangers, information practitioners and LIS educators who seek a practical collaborative approach to designing library spaces that are genuinely appealing and hospitable to users.
The paper addresses the conference theme 'Hono Tangata: Rangahaua kia mārama' by bridging gaps between research, education and practice related to library design as participatory practice and learning focus in LIS.