

## Te Puāwaitanga o te Tangata - The Blossoming of People – Aranui Library, enhancing the lives of the community.

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In September 2012 Christchurch's Aranui community celebrated the opening of its long-awaited and much anticipated library. Situated in the east of the city in an area of high deprivation, with a large youth population and high numbers of Maori and Pasifika, the Aranui Library was the first new library to be built in Christchurch in six years and the first civic facility to be started and completed post earthquakes. This unique library is a vibrant community focal point and is the result of meaningful consultation, producing a shared and heartfelt vision, which was to create a place which would be a source of pride and inspiration to all, reflecting the uniqueness and diversity of its community. A place which felt like their place to the people of Aranui. This session will outline the process which led to the opening of this successful facility, including the extensive community consultation which guided the development and design of the building and its services. It will also reflect on the questions, are we making a difference? And, have we achieved our vision; enhancing the lives of the Aranui community?

Audience: Public librarians

### Background – A library based on need

The Aranui community, situated in the east of Christchurch has long been characterised as a community in need. The 2006 Census confirmed that Aranui had ratios significantly higher than the city average of residents under 15 years of age, Maori, Pacific Peoples, single parent families, households without a motor vehicle or access to the internet, no qualification and unemployment. Aranui is also rated Decile 10 on the NZ Deprivation Index which measures aspects of social and material deprivation, 10 being the most deprived.

This statistical and demographic data, along with research and analysis of community needs identified by social and educational agencies working in the area, indicated the need for a library facility of some form in Aranui from as early as 1992. In 2008 the Libraries 2025 Facilities plan recommended the establishment of a library in Aranui to fill a gap in current library provision within an area of high socio-economic need. Christchurch City Council acknowledged this and incorporated the Aranui Library project into the Long Term Council Community Plan for 2009/19. A long-held dream of the Aranui community was about to become a reality.

Eight potential sites were then evaluated for suitability using a weighted attributes methodology which enabled analysis and ranking of the sites against a carefully selected set of criteria. Despite challenges from some groups in the community who felt that they should be directly involved in this process, the site selected, when

announced, was widely agreed to be located right in the heart of the Aranui community.

## The Vision

Christchurch City Libraries envisioned a library for Aranui which would be:

A warm, welcoming, safe people space, reflecting the uniqueness and diversity of its community. A place which is a source of pride and inspiration to all, equipped with the technology and surroundings to encourage communication, creativity and learning, and systems to encourage independent use and self-service. A place for everyone. A place to connect, with people, information, collections, programmes and resources. A stimulating place, a modern and innovative place. A place which feels like 'our place' to the people of Aranui.

The challenge was how to make that vision a reality and how to ensure that that the community had a say in the way their library was to look and to feel and what it would offer to them. This was even more important and even more of a challenge because the idea of a library in Aranui was a seed planted a long time ago and there was some feeling in the community that through previous meetings and consultation during this time, the Council had over-promised and under-delivered. Our greatest challenge was to build trust and to truly involve the community in the areas where their views could make a difference, enabling them to feel real ownership of their library.

## Community Consultation – They said, we heard, we did.

The Libraries team worked closely with Council's Community Engagement team and the architects to plan our consultation and engagement with the Aranui community. A major vehicle for this community consultation was the AFFIRM (Affirmative Action in Aranui) festival, an annual family event organised by the Aranui Community Trust, which had been a major event in this community since its inception. Indeed the consultation with the community which took place at AFFIRM in 2009 proved to be a milestone in both the development of the library building design and of the relationship with the community it was to serve.

In order to provide a library that the people of Aranui would embrace we needed to know what the community wanted their library to look like and feel like and what they wanted to see and do in their library. To achieve this we designed an interactive and visual wall display concept as a way of bringing the possibilities of library design to life. Large photo display boards were set up to portraying colourful images of possible library features including external architecture, internal design, art, furniture, technology and staff. The images were sourced mostly from libraries, local, national and international and provided a flavour of different styles which could resonate in the imagination of the viewer.

A simple but very effective voting system was devised using coloured dots, six per person, which they could stick on their favourite pictures to indicate their preferences in each category. The colour of the dot also indicated the age bracket of the voter, child, youth or adult. The Libraries stall drew people like a magnet and they engaged really well with the concept, asking questions about progress on library plans and expressing great interest in the process and the activity. It soon became apparent that there were strong preferences in the community for some of the concepts and styles represented on the picture walls and it was easy to see where these preferences were universally expressed by all age-groups and where there were obvious favourites with a particular group. There was also an opportunity for younger children to participate by drawing their vision of what they wanted in the Aranui Library on a sheet of paper printed with the simple outline of a house/library. This initiative proved to be both popular and a useful indicator of the preferences of the very young.

Once analysed, the data from the photo wall at AFFIRM gave us some clear messages. All three age sectors indicated overwhelmingly that they wanted a light, bright and modern building with up to date technology including self service, and that they wanted to see the ethnic make-up of their community reflected in art in the building. Other design elements favoured were a textured concrete exterior, a large meeting space to enable the community to connect and engage in activities together in groups both large and small and an enclosed outdoor play area for children.

Preferences for what people wanted to do in the library included events and activities, meeting friends and playing on computers along with reading and individual study. This rich community feedback gathered at AFFIRM was then assimilated and integrated by the architects into concept designs for the new Aranui Library. These concept designs were used to consult more widely with different groups in the community, including pre-schools, schools, youth and church groups. Regular updates were also given to the Aranui Community Trust and Community Board.

The project was well underway, consultation and community engagement shaping up really well and the contract just out for tender when the first Christchurch earthquake struck. This necessitated a pause in proceedings but once the go-ahead was given we were back to AFFIRM in 2010 to feed back to the Aranui Community on what we had heard from them and how we had integrated their wishes and ideas into the design of the building. Key features of the building design directly attributable to our previous consultation were a wet wall, designed to protect the building from vandalism and graffiti, deterring would-be taggers and trouble makers by drenching anyone who got too close to the building after hours, the Whanau/meeting room, children's play area and the integration of art into the fabric of the building. This took the form of a wrap-around art work based on the design of local artist and carver Raphael Stowers. The artist incorporated design motifs from the Maori and Pacific cultures represented in the Aranui community and carpet tiles inside the library were designed to reflect elements of this exterior art work.

We used this opportunity to ask the community what they wanted in the way of programmes, collections and services in their new library. The main themes gathered

were homework help, computer courses, digital photography and programmes based around music and gaming. Library familiarisation tours were also suggested including how to use the library and procedures in case of emergency! The idea of combining physical activity with learning also came through from both youth and children. Books were a must for all respondents and the need for collections in Maori and Pacific Island languages was strongly signalled.

There was one area where the feedback we received was very clear and that concerned the library staff. It became obvious that the right staff were the key to the library's success in the eyes of the community who wanted to see themselves in the faces of the staff; friendly, familiar faces comprising a cultural mix which reflected the Aranui community. Cultural awareness, language skills including Te Reo Maori and the languages of the Pasifika communities were seen as important, but the over-riding wish expressed by all at every consultation was for staff who were warm, friendly, approachable and able to connect.

So we had heard what the community wanted and needed if this library was to fly and we were serious about delivering the facility they deserved, but we had one more hurdle in front of us. The earthquake of February 2011 hit the east of the city hard and the Aranui community was badly affected. Once again the future of the project was uncertain. Following a redesign phase extra funds were requested from Council who confirmed their support for the building of this facility and the Aranui Library project lived on. Construction began and a very cool building began to take shape on the corner of Wainoni Park.

Connections made previously through community consultation continued to grow during the build. One local pre-school visited regularly to check on progress through the fence and returned to the pre-school to draw pictures of cranes and diggers and talk with their teachers about the various jobs involved on a building site. This group returned just prior to the library's opening to press their hands into trays of brightly coloured paint and lay their prints on the concrete interior walls of the plant room, stamping their ownership on the library for posterity. A community planting day was also held for locals to contribute to the landscaping of the site, and a small but enthusiastic group of locals took this opportunity get down and dirty and personally connected to their new library.

The Aranui Library finally opened in September 2012. An architectural statement and a statement about the worth of the community it was to serve. A light, bright and welcoming building, reflecting the diversity and uniqueness of the community, through its targeted collections, its integrated art and through its staff; a team recruited to match the clearly voiced needs and expectations of the Aranui community. The opening of the library was truly cause for celebration but the hard work had really just begun.

## Aranui Library now – the reality

### Early Days

At the start the biggest obstacles were developing and maintaining a well performing team - who were themselves, new to libraries and librarianship, dealing with a new building and striving to find our place in the community. This involved a number of different aspects from choosing the right team to establishing trust within the community. Since our opening in September last year we have found that the most frequent library user group are aged between five and sixteen, and are very independent and self reliant young people. They are mostly of Maori or Pacific Island descent, and if it weren't for school they would come and go from the library all day everyday. Most of the children are also close family friends, if not related to each other. They come from local families who live within walking distance of the library and because there is generally no adult supervision or presence they are fiercely protective of one another.

This characteristic we notice has developed largely through necessity because of the socio-economic pressures of the area. In the first few months of opening we have seen these young people collectively take on rising gang issues, adult-child bullying and domestic issues along with their everyday teen/tween age pressures. We are filled with nothing but admiration for their constant bravery and adaptability. The library by default has become a second home to them and because we have maintained a strong stance that we are a neutral and safe place for all, they have come to respect our rules and learnt to trust us, though this did take time. We have however, had to work hard to remind families that we can not allow children as young as six and eight be left at the library with their preschool aged siblings. We have even had two cases where 4 year olds have been left here by themselves.

### New Team /Trust building

Being a new team we were really focused on creating our own kaupapa (a set of principles and ideas that inform behaviour and customs) and how we wanted to get involved in the community. We really wanted to create that sense of ownership from the community and worked on a number of projects to help establish this. Another key objective for us was to also create a safe, welcoming environment. To do this we took existing processes and guidelines used across our network of libraries and worked as a team to interpret them to suit the Aranui situation. For example there is an existing Customer Code of Conduct and as a team we focus on the respect element of this code to make it clear to our customers that you need to respect one another and if you ever feel unsafe then to tell a staff member. This was mainly due to us not recognising any gang affiliations in the library and making people take off their 'colours' when in the library.

Another key approach for us was taking the time to learn all our regular patrons' names, letting them get to know us, making the kids especially know that we respected them as individuals and what they had to say was important to us. This kanohi ki te kanohi (face to face engagement) will be forever ongoing but was the

start of our foundations and along with inspiration from Tupu Youth Library, led to our successful holiday programmes and further staff/community engagement.

### **Utilising the passions and interests of the staff**

One of our first big events was the annual AFFIRM festival. In the past, as previously mentioned, AFFIRM was where the Libraries did some of their most effective community consultation, and as an acknowledgement of this, the organisers changed the physical orientation of the entire festival to make the library a focal point of the festival in 2012.

We decided to use this opportunity to showcase our own in-house staff talent and the non-traditional library identity we had been forging since opening and as a scaffold for future local artists. We particularly wanted to celebrate and recognise the input of Local Aranui Artist Raphael Stowers, who worked alongside our architects and building management team to produce the wrap around designs on our library windows, walls, and carpets and recognise the use of his mana that he gave to us with his designs.

In the build up to this festival two talented artists who just happen to work at Aranui, took nominated youth artists through our Artists @ AFFIRM workshops. The young artists ranged from the ages of 9-16 years, and were all selected and nominated by local schools and youth groups. Under the skilled and watchful eyes of these staff members the youth were guided to reproduce tapa style prints and carve Oamaru stone based on the Pasifika and Maori designs adapted from the original building sketches of Stowers.

We displayed these alongside our work areas during the festival and festival goers were also able to make their own tapa style print using some of the same templates the children used, and carved their own mini Oamaru stones on the day. Raphael also gave a short korero (speech) on the day of his original brief, vision, and end product of the designs that decorate our beautiful library.

### **Freedom to develop and ownership**

As new staff, developing a new model of service targeted to our community, we were given the freedom to develop our own ideas and to be very action orientated – if we though an idea sounded like fun, would be good for the library and community, then we went ahead and did it within a short time frame. One such idea was an impromptu Aranui Musical Guitar Jam. With some quick pulling of strings, temptation of fish and chips (funded with a few dollars here and there from the kind pockets of staff), whispers in some local ears, and the invitation of a special guest it went off without a hitch. For an hour Aranui was filled with the beautiful voices and raw talent of our “performers” - Peniha Williams, Hautapu Toka, and special guest Zion Tauamiti playing a mixture of reggae, gospel, R&B and soul on guitars; one of our own staff on the bongos; and our young people and their whānau who took turns at drumming using whatever they had and of course singing along to their favourites.

There was however a bit of a sneaky twist, as our performers were not only sharing their talents but without saying a word they were a symbol of hope and strength for our youth. In consenting to perform together they chose to consciously shed former youth gang affiliations as an example for the rangatahi of Aranui – who face these pressures every day. Our young regulars enjoyed the responsibility of scootering down to collect our fish ‘n’ chips, and gave us very sage advice on how to effectively feed a large group on our limited budget and who was the best local provider.

The older children were also given the responsibility of ensuring everyone had clean hands, and made sure there was order while our Library Aunty blessed the food and gathering before eating. With this simple event, Aranui library was more than just an idea, a building or a space – it was and always will be about the people of Aranui.

One year on I think we can all be proud of what we have achieved.

Relationships have been built and have grown.

The staff are passionate and committed.

The Aranui Library is a shining beacon in the heart of the community.

The library is making a difference.