

Pushing the limits: play, explore, experiment



Matt Finch is a writer and consultant who makes fun things for people to do in public places. Find out more at www.matthewfinch.me/about Matt is a contributor to the American Library Association's 2015 *The Library Innovation Toolkit* (<https://www.alastore.ala.org/detail.aspx?ID=11142>).

Libraries are inspirational spaces where people can experiment creatively and engage with knowledge, culture and self-directed learning, says **Matt Finch**. He describes why 'non-shelfy' activities such as Dark Nights, comics festivals and pub gaming demonstrate the best of what libraries can offer at a local, community level.

TENACIOUS. Transgressive. Tireless. It took me a long time to find the right words to describe librarians.

I was late to the party anyway. I went to a lot of archives when I was a student, but I never paid public libraries much mind until I visited New Zealand a few years back. In 2011, Christchurch was a city devastated by a series of earthquakes. I went to interview their librarians about a series of comic book workshops that they were running, only to find they'd been cancelled. That figures, I told myself. After a natural disaster, I thought librarians would be the first public sector employees to give up and go home.

I couldn't have been more wrong. Staying to hear the stories of Christchurch library staff, I discovered a profession whose numbers were driven, determined, and relentlessly creative in finding solutions to unexpected problems.

When structural damage forced branches to close, the wi-fi was left on so that people outside could contact their loved ones via Skype and email. Librarians then began visiting emergency shelters to run storytimes which entertained children and gave parents time to reflect on their situation, away from the

immediate demands of childcare. Temporary branches were set up and the service is now thriving once more.

Erica Rankin, a Community Libraries Manager in Christchurch explains: 'Sometimes simply being open, creating a sense of routine and connecting people to something familiar, was enough, or creating temporary arrangements in order to continue familiar services. At other times it was a case of taking services to damaged areas, running special community events, collaborating with other organisations, rescuing precious heritage or hosting organisations that were facilitating the recovery effort or providing vital services.'

Communities under pressure

When communities are under pressure, the true value of the public library becomes evident. Working in Australian and Kiwi libraries, I saw that even routine days were full of unexpected demands and challenges.

Often, those demands have little to do with items on shelves. I saw a rural library providing a safe classroom space for a transgender teen who had opted for distance learning over school attendance. Auckland Libraries

Fun Palaces 2014 at the London Metropolitan Archives. Photo courtesy of LMA



“

When communities are under pressure, the true value of the public library becomes evident.

FUN PALACES



Tabletop Superheroes – a community-designed, free-to-download library role-playing game for all ages. Photo courtesy of Parkes Shire Library under Creative Commons



Parkes kids design and build their own cardboard fortresses. Photo courtesy of Parkes Shire Library under Creative Commons

A traditional Māori greeting with Star Wars cosplay at Free Comic Book Day, Auckland, New Zealand. Photo © Matt Finch



Kids in robot suits. Photo courtesy of Parkes Shire Library under Creative Commons



exhibited old photographs of indigenous people from the colonial archives, so that relatives might identify these unknown objects of the imperial gaze. Elsewhere, family history officers worked to locate the unmarked grave of a stillborn child.

Stimulating imagination and creativity

The UN's culture organisation Unesco and the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) got together over 20 years ago to devise their Public Library Missions. This document doesn't even mention books. It talks about reading, sure – but even in 1994, librarianship was not a manifesto for shelves. Instead, the focus was on activities like stimulating imagination and creativity, supporting the oral tradition, and providing opportunities for personal creative development.

This isn't a loss of focus. Quite the oppo-

site: it reminds us that librarianship transcends any one medium, and gives the lie to those who think that the age of e-reading has made public libraries obsolete. The education system is increasingly about training students to pass tests. Many digital materials are designed to make a profit out of the end user. But the public library is the one place you can go, whoever you are, wherever you are from, to explore all of human knowledge and culture on your own terms.

We fund state schools because no child chooses where they are born or who they are born to, and public hospitals because nobody chooses when they get sick or injured. Public libraries provide communities with a similar kind of equity when it comes to engaging with the arts, science, culture, and knowledge – whether as creators or consumers.

Over the last few years, I've worked with

organisations across Australia and New Zealand to explore new forms of public librarianship. The same spirit which saw Christchurch librarians venture out into a shattered city, finding ways to do their job under the most trying circumstances, has led in more peaceful times to a range of playful, daring, and innovative programming.

Woven into everyday life

In Parkes, a rural community of just 15,000 people in New South Wales, we looked for ways to weave librarianship into the community's everyday life. We took all-ages tabletop games to a local pub for an over-18s gaming night, and printed stories by the winners of a local writing competition onto takeaway coffee cups which were used by the town's cafes. Locals and visitors alike got a dose of local literature – and a glimpse of the Parkes library brand – with every shot of caffeine.

In Auckland, we arranged for librarians to be on-site in the city's leading comic stores for Free Comic Book Day. Armed with trolleys of books and a laptop to issue them, staff got to share the library's collection with a horde of pop culture fanatics. The retailers, who were running cosplay events, colouring competitions, and other activities to boost traffic, got a free additional attraction within their store. This experiment in combining book retail and librarianship led to Auckland Libraries taking its own stand at the city's Comic Convention.

Robots, zombies, monsters

We weren't just pushing the physical boundaries of public librarianship, but the conceptual ones too. On the basis that libraries are the place where you come to learn on your own terms, teams in both Australia and New Zealand experimented with live-action play – from time-travelling detectives to battles against robots, zombies, and monsters.

Stepping into the world of a story provided a boisterous low-cost riff on the trend for immersive theatre events. We hosted our first Parkes zombie siege in a one-room library which only opened one day a week, to demonstrate the value of even our smallest branches. In later events, cops, firefighters, students, and community volunteers joined kids in storytelling very different from that offered through a screen or page – a real life 'Choose Your Own Adventure'.

Burlesque opera singers

We didn't want adults to be left out either, so some of our programming was aimed at over-18s.

A few months after Free Comic Book Day, Auckland Libraries hosted an adults-only festival called Dark Night, which promised to 'question, celebrate, and challenge sex and sexuality on page, stage, and screen.' Burlesque opera singers, writers of fan fiction and erotica, a Maori drag queen, and a psychology professor all took part in a season of events across the city. This wasn't publicly funded prurience, but a critical celebration of sexuality in contemporary culture, taking place as New Zealand's Marriage Equality Bill came into law.

From Dark Night to comics festivals and pub gaming, none of these activities were conventionally 'shelfy', but they were all pure library. They offered engagement with knowledge, culture, and self-directed learning. This attitude is embodied by the Fun Palaces movement in the UK.

Fun Palaces

Fun Palaces were the brainchild of theatre director Joan Littlewood and architect Cedric Price back in the 1960s. They imagined a 'laboratory of fun' that would serve as a pop-up community venue for both art and science. The plan was to turn theatres, libraries, and museums everywhere into places where people of all ages could try their hand at art and science. On 4 and 5 October 2014,



Robots vs monsters – kids in cardboard robot suits take on teen monsters like 'Chainsaw Elvis'.

Photo courtesy of Parkes Shire Library under Creative Commons

the Fun Palace dream finally came to life, led by theatre director Stella Duffy. Organisations from the Royal Shakespeare Company to a Canadian radio station opened their doors to play and adventure.

Homegrown innovations

In Parkes, we wanted to remind national and international bodies that people in rural, regional, and suburban areas are also entitled to a cultural life, as both audiences and creators. We used Fun Palaces as an opportunity to establish international connections and maximise the impact of our homegrown innovations.

We created sessions based on the book *School for Supervillains* by Louie Stowell. Louie pre-recorded video introductions to workshops where children were invited to devise super villainous traps to defeat superheroes. They were helped by teen volunteers who in previous years had taken part in our zombie and monster games.

We also devised an all-ages game inspired by Louie's book and the work of sci-fi author Cory Doctorow. Local teens play-tested it, then we got permission to distribute it online under a Creative Commons license. By mak-

ing these strategic international connections, we ensured that a little rural community could make a big splash.

Having fun in Britain

British libraries also joined the Fun Palaces adventure. Branches including the libraries of Skipton, Norwood, Lancaster, and Hull all took part or hosted activities, as well as the City of London's Metropolitan Archives, where Jan Pimblett and Symeon Ververidis ran an event for 90 speakers of English as a second language. The archivists' Fun Palace blended art and science by looking at architecture and pleasure gardens.

As Symeon explains, 'We got in touch with the tutors at a local language school and devised a programme to suit their students. The ages ranged from people in their early 20s to those in their 50s. We let our visitors see and handle original documents from our collection. They then got to create poems and spoken word pieces, or make 3D architectural models.'

Jan is now looking forward to Fun Palaces 2015. Her team will invite people to explore the archive of early scientist Robert Hooke, with its quirky mix of meticulous observation and personal idiosyncrasy: 'Fun Palaces create new opportunities to connect with people we've worked with in past, from homeless groups to people with mental health issues, as well as new audiences. There's loads of scope to bring people together.'

In Hull, theatre company Ensemble 52 joined forces with the city's libraries to offer a programme of music, art, and robot-themed play.

Inspirational environments

Ensemble's co-director Dave Windass said: 'Library spaces are very inspirational environments, much more than rooms full of books. They're creative spaces where people can feel relaxed about experimenting creatively and participating in events like Fun Palaces in a fearless way.'

The Fun Palaces 2015 mission statement points readers to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states: 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.'

Fun Palaces, offsite librarianship, immersive play, and cheeky burlesque programmes all speak directly to this offer, and demonstrate that the world of libraries goes way beyond shelves. Some people argue that the age of e-books has rendered public libraries obsolete, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Not only are public libraries vital community services, but they are vital *local* services. A local public library is like the TARDIS on your street corner: it might look like a humble box from the outside, but step through the doors and it can take you anywhere humans have ever dreamed of.

● Find out more about Fun Palaces at www.funpalaces.co.uk 

“

We weren't just pushing the physical boundaries of public librarianship, but the conceptual ones too.