



BIG AND *beautiful*

The National Library of Australia is one of the most recognisable and iconic landmarks in Canberra, if not Australia. Opened in 1968, this beautiful and classic building attracts thousands of visitors every year. AILEEN WEIR tells us about how the library is creating adaptable spaces to service the needs of its users.

Over the last few years, the National Library's interior has undergone a significant transformation. The original reading rooms and public spaces, although beautiful, were constructed before the internet revolutionised how people use libraries. The library engaged Cunningham Martyn Design to develop interiors that embrace the benefits of technology yet respect the heritage and grandeur of the original building. The result is a revitalised National Library that offers a range of flexible and adaptable spaces that promote intellectual and creative endeavour, facilitate access to our general, special and digital collections, and are a pleasure to visit and use.

One of the most significant changes is the new Special Collections Reading Room that opened on 5 January 2015. Before the renovations, the library operated several

small reading rooms arranged by collection format across multiple floors. The spacious, integrated Special Collections Reading Room, located on the first floor overlooking the Main Reading Room, now enables researchers to access the library's extensive collection of manuscripts, maps, oral history, pictures, rare books and ephemera in one location. Technology is omnipresent in the new space and research facilities include group consultation rooms and booths for listening to audio recordings or dictating. The library's unique and rarest collections are delivered to a secure room behind the service point until issued to users who can access them under supervision. The decision to consolidate several smaller reading rooms into one larger space has enabled the library to offer extended access to these collections until 8pm on weekdays and 10am – 5pm on Saturdays.

The ground floor is now entirely devoted to public space, following the opening of two new galleries and a significant expansion of the Main Reading Room. The permanent Treasures Gallery showcases the most iconic collection items and a state-of-the-art gallery can house temporary exhibitions. A new Newspapers and Family History zone opened in May



2015, creating a welcoming environment for genealogists to pursue this popular pastime. Digital microform scanning equipment does not require the same low-light conditions as older microform readers and users appreciate having more natural light as a result of the relocation of this service from the lower ground floor. New bookable group rooms are also proving popular, particularly with students. The changes in the Main Reading Room will be complete when a new quiet zone opens before Christmas this year. As with most libraries, the National Library has established zones in its reading rooms to cater for a variety of uses through clever use of furniture, lighting and design.

The space on the lower ground floor formerly occupied by the Maps Reading Rooms and the Newspapers and Microforms Reading Room is now an expanded café and casual seating area that is fully wireless-enabled and is very popular. Improved amenities also include free access to self-serve lockers. The former Manuscripts Reading Room, a beautiful space with high heritage value, has been renamed the Nan Kivell Room after one of the library's founding collections and will be used for invitation-only events, such as collection viewings.

Maintaining library services during the construction period required careful planning, a strong public communication strategy and considerable goodwill from both the public and library staff. Construction began – after a lengthy planning and design phase – in April 2014 and is expected to finish by the end of 2015. Despite construction taking nearly two years, affecting four floors of the building and requiring the relocation of approximately 120 staff members, the reading rooms had to be closed for only two days over the entire period. Feedback about the changes has been very positive, and the thoughtful juxtaposition of both contemporary and original features has been much appreciated. Having been part of this major project from its inception, I feel privileged to see these beautiful spaces come into being and am confident that they will encourage onsite use of the library's rich and diverse collections for years to come. 🌟

AILEEN WEIR, AALIA (CP)
 Director, Reader Services
 National Library of Australia
 aweir@nla.gov.au