



AUSTRALIA'S CITY OF LITERATURE

Melbourne joined the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in 2008. At the time, it was designated the first – and only – Creative City in Australia, and the second City of Literature in the world. David Ryding explains how it came about.

There's no one single reason why a city becomes a 'City of Literature' (or in fact any of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) six 'creative city' designations, which also include craft and folk art, design, film, gastronomy, literature and new media). Your city needs to be invested across a whole range of relevant activities to gain UNESCO designation as a creative city.

I think it's not unlike what makes a city a city in the first place. It's never one single icon that makes the city. It's really all the little things that build up to give its city its character. Sydney isn't Sydney just because of the harbour, for example. It's iconic and certainly affects the city, and the way it interacts (try and get people from the North Shore to an event in Rozelle for example) but it's only one part.

The Cities of Literature now number eleven across the world, and Australia now has two creative cities, with Sydney being designated a City of Film.

Despite what some may have thought, we didn't get our City of Literature designation because of the Wheeler Centre; that came later. Melbourne's designation as a UNESCO City of Literature was an acknowledgment of the 'breadth, depth and vibrancy of the city's literary culture'.

When explaining how we achieved this designation, the

architects of our bid always point out we achieved it because we love books. How that is quantified is curious. Statistically, more Victorians read for pleasure than any other Australian state. And last year, over 230,000 children participated in the Premier's Reading Challenge, reading more than four million books between them.

One question I am often asked is, 'what does a City of Literature Office do?' The office fills in the 'gaps' in the City. For example, in Iowa City there is no writers' festival, so the City of Literature Office runs it.

The Melbourne office works in three broad ways. Firstly, we work on strategies to ensure all the reasons we are a City of Literature remain strong. It's easy for arts and culture to celebrate success but that success must be sustained. For example, the journals in Melbourne are a strong contributor to our status a literary city – but 80% of them are run by volunteers.

Secondly, the office assists with communication between the different areas of activity. At the moment, I am doing a lot of match-making between libraries and arts organisations. Every literary arts organisation I speak with says they want to partner with libraries!

Lastly, the office makes and supports international connections. Obviously, being part of a network of international cities offers us an easy initial line of communication, and a standing invitation to connect. One example is the way we have partnered the 20 Minute City Initiative with the Digital Writers Festival. As well as working with our sister cities, we encourage connection

between countries too. We are actively supporting connections between Melbourne and India, and Melbourne and China at the moment.

The City of Literature Office works in these ways towards our key objective – ensuring all the people in Melbourne, and Victoria, benefit from the advantage of living in a City of Literature. It's too easy for literature to be dismissed as a 'middleclass white pastime'. The Office is working to make sure this doesn't happen. There's more about our activities on our website at www.cityofliterature.com.au.

And libraries? Libraries are the heartbeat of Melbourne as a literary city. They really touch all sides of the city – they engage with the publishers, interact with bookshops, event programmers, and with that most important – sometimes overlooked – group: readers.

Libraries engage readers in a way which allows maximum access. Of course you all know that. The question is (for all of us, not just in Melbourne), what more can we do to make our cities more literary? We are so well-resourced here, what more can we do?

This is a question I ask often, and I invite you to ask it as well.

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The Emerging Writers' Festival at 100 Pound Bend. Photo: Mark Gambino

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