

ANZSOG CASE PROGRAM – TEACHING NOTE

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The City of Melbourne's narm ngarrgu Library and Family Services

An ANZSOG Teaching Note by Marinella Padula

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Summary

The City of Melbourne's (CoM) original plan to open a purpose-built childcare centre as part of the \$1.7 billion Queen Victoria Market precinct redevelopment was thwarted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Left with a partially fitted-out building, the council decided instead to establish a new city library and family services centre. Supportive leadership gave the project team scope to think ambitiously about what this facility could be and do. However, there were three key principles guiding their approach. They were to:

1. Incorporate Aboriginal languages, stories, cultural practice and wisdom into the design, experience and operation of our library spaces.
2. Ensure no one in the community is left behind by reaching as many residents, workers, students and visitors as possible and being responsive to their needs.

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3. Continue to foster a sense of belonging to ensure our city and its community thrives ([Future Libraries Framework, p.i](#)).

Despite a relatively tight timeframe, many stakeholders and big aspirations, narm ngarrgu was completed on time and budget in late 2023. Lauded for its innovative use of space, materials and resources, the facility was rapidly embraced by users with patron numbers exceeding expectations. It was also attracting a wide range of visitors including First Nations groups. narm ngarrgu – meaning Melbourne knowledge – represents an instructive example of place-focused design and invites consideration of the role of libraries into the future.

Suggested audience

This case would suit a variety of groups and purposes, from public sector practitioners to students of public policy and administration, urban planning and social design.

Learning objectives

This case can be used to illustrate a place-focused approach where community needs and interests are at the centre of project design and delivery, but government retains overall responsibility. Readers will discover how narm ngarrgu's design, location, operations, collections, facilities and people combined synergistically to realise the Council's objectives, including its broader policy goals in promoting sustainability, economic development, cultural awareness and social inclusion. The case encourages readers to imagine how other government policies, services and facilities might better reflect and respond to their users. At the same time, it can prompt discussion about whether the expanding role of libraries and community hubs is masking deficiencies in other areas of government.

Readers of this case should be equipped to:

- Reflect on the importance of libraries in Melbourne and urban areas more generally.
- Understand how the three key principles of the City of Melbourne's [Future Libraries Framework](#) informed and shaped the narm ngarrgu project.
- Discuss how the project team imbued narm ngarrgu with a sense of place and connection to Aboriginal culture.
- Analyse the linkages between different elements of the project and how they influenced each other.
- Explore some of the considerations related to working with First Nations stakeholders.
- Consider issues such as whether narm ngarrgu and projects like it are being forced to compensate for service gaps in other areas of government.

Resource: City of Melbourne video guide to narm ngarrgu [3.17 mins]. Available via <https://youtu.be/UP5pBRirUB4>

Possible teaching approaches

narm ngarrgu offers multiple teaching applications depending on interest and audience. The following section outlines a session/s based upon place-focused and place-based strategies for government. It then shows how the case might serve as a gateway to discussions of public value. Questions about the role of public libraries now and into the future can be added to a session on public value or explored in their own right.

1. Place-focused and place-based approaches

One lens for examining the narm ngarrgu project is through place-focused and place-based approaches. Speaking broadly, these approaches harness deep knowledge and understanding of a particular area to address the issues affecting the community, which are often complex, interrelated and influenced by local factors. Place is also central to Aboriginal culture and identity with that significance reflected in the language.

Place-based approaches are most commonly associated with urban planning and local governments where local needs, communities and circumstances are integral to how projects proceed. More recently, the term 'place-based' has been used in other contexts such as social policy making and program design/implementation. While there is a degree of overlap, the meaning may differ.

Governments, recognising the limitations of ‘one-size-fits-most’ or single-issue approaches, are increasingly interested in creating policies and programs that respond to people’s needs and circumstances in the places they operate, and tackling issues more synergistically. They are also interested in harnessing the experience and know-how of local communities and external organisations in a cooperative way. These approaches can improve outcomes by, for example, boosting uptake or participation, preventing problems from escalating, minimising waste, or increasing satisfaction and wellbeing.

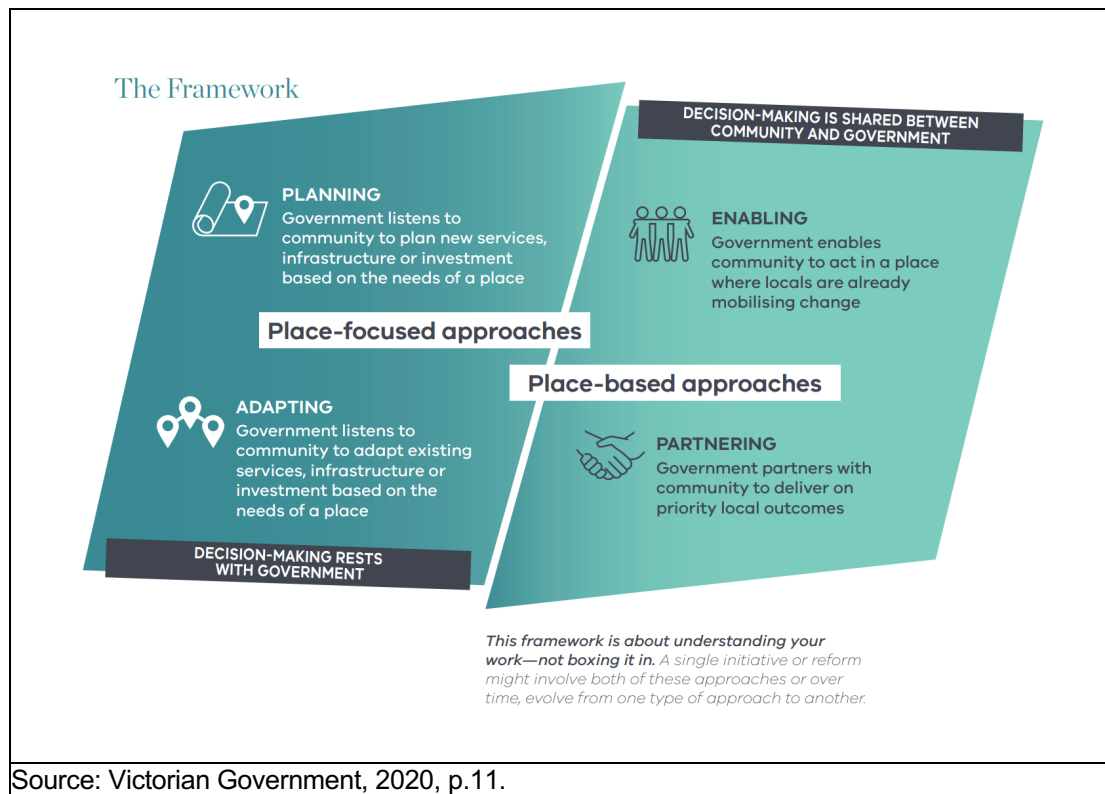
Terms such as ‘place-based’ or ‘place-focused’ may have distinct meanings or be used interchangeably, depending on the context. A 2023 survey in Australia of federal government documents referencing place-based approaches found that most didn’t offer an explicit definition, though they shared many elements (Klepac et al., 2023). The authors proposed this definition based on the common features they identified:

Place-based approaches are collaborative programs, interventions, or initiatives in which multiple stakeholders, united by a common vision, draw on the skills, knowledge and experience of local people to address complex issues within a specific geographic location. Recognising and leveraging the influence of ‘place’ on population outcomes, place-based approaches are context-dependent, responsive to the shifting needs and priorities of the places in which they are implemented and include ‘people in place’ and/or local organisations in decision-making (pp.3-4).

The Victorian Government prepared its own framework in 2020 which distinguishes between place-based and place-focused approaches. According to the framework:

Place-focused approaches plan and adapt government services and infrastructure to ensure they are meeting local needs. Government listens to community to adapt how we do our business, but ultimately, has control over the objectives, scope and implementation.

Place-based approaches target the specific circumstances of a place and engage local people as active participants in development and implementation, requiring government to share decision-making. Place-based approaches can complement the bigger picture of services and infrastructure. They engage with issues and opportunities that are driven by complex, intersecting local factors and require a cross-sectoral or long-term response (p.3).



The Framework does not favour one approach over the other but attempts to elucidate how, why and when a certain approach may be preferable. It also acknowledges that a project might combine elements of both.

Reflecting the growing demand for place-based and focused approaches, the Federal Government announced a new national organisation in late-2024, called the [Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment \(PLACE\)](#). A government-philanthropic joint initiative, its aim is to support community-led, place-based approaches to address social and economic challenges by providing research, capacity building and advice.

With respect to this case, narm ngarrgu most closely resembles a place-focused approach in that decision-making responsibility and control of the facility rests with the City of Melbourne. The case study shows how CoM took a set of principles from The [Future Libraries Framework](#) aimed at addressing a number of complex, interrelated issues concerning the City of Melbourne and applied them to the project. This, of course, included engaging with the local community and different stakeholder groups, using several different methods to ascertain their needs and how the new facility could address them. It also points to some of the challenges in working with different groups, in particular, First Nations stakeholders, whose operating norms don't necessarily gel with council project management schedules.

narm ngarrgu offers multiple pedagogical options, the first as simply an example of a place-focused approach for students to contrast with other place-focused or place-based examples.

Others may include:

Class assignment

1. Choose a government service, program or policy that you're familiar with and outline the ways in which it embodies place-focused or place-based design. Did the government choose the right approach? Why or why not? What could they have changed or improved? How?
2. With the principles of place-focused/place-based approaches in mind, select a government service, program or policy that would benefit from taking such an approach. How would you do it? What challenges might you face? What outcomes could be achieved or improved?

The above assignment questions could also be adapted to an in-class discussion using examples supplied by students or the instructor.

Further resources

A framework for place-based approaches, Victorian Government, February 2020, <https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-03/Working-%20together-in%20place-Policy%20Framework.pdf>

Future Libraries Framework 2021, City of Melbourne, melbourne.vic.gov.au, <https://mvga-prod-files.s3.ap-southeast-4.amazonaws.com/public/SiteCollectionDocuments/future-libraries-framework.pdf>

Klepac, B., Mowle, A., Riley, T., Craike, M. (2023) Place-based approaches: Lessons from and for Australian federal public policy. Policy brief. Pathways in Place-Victoria University. Victoria University. <https://doi.org/10.26196/td5m-vv03> <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/47483/1/Place-based%20approaches%20Lessons%20from%20and%20for%20Australian%20federal%20public%20policy%20Policy%20Brief%20Snapshot.pdf>

Planning Liveable Cities: A place-based approach to sequencing infrastructure and growth, Infrastructure Australia, 11 December 2018.

https://www.infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-06/ifa_225232_planning_liveable_cities_report_2018_fa_web_hr.pdf

2. Public value

A key reason to adopt place-focused or place-based approaches is to enhance public value, very simply, the societal benefit generated by government activity using public resources. A systematic literature review of public value measurement studies from 1995 to 2016 (Faulkner and Kaufman, 2017) identified a broad range of public value dimensions:

- *public satisfaction*
- *economic value – generating economic activity/employment*
- *social and cultural value – social capital/cohesion*
- *political value – democratic dialogue, public participation*
- *ecological value – sustainable development, reducing pollution, waste, global warming*
- *service delivery – take-up, satisfaction, choice, fairness, cost*
- *financial performance – revenues, expenditure value for money, efficiency*
- *non-financial performance – efficiency, customer satisfaction, service quality*
- *social value from the user perspective, tangible economic value from the administration perspective, intangible economic value from the administration perspective*
- *trust and legitimacy*
- *protecting citizens' rights*

They then grouped these dimensions to create four domains.

1	Outcome achievement	<i>The extent to which a public body is improving publicly valued outcomes across a wide variety of areas. This can include social, economic, environmental and cultural outcomes.</i>
2	Trust and legitimacy	<i>The extent to which an organisation and its activities are trusted and perceived to be legitimate by the public and by key stakeholders.</i>
3	Service delivery quality	<i>The extent to which services are delivered in a high-quality manner that is considerate of users' needs. These will be maximised when service users are satisfied, and when they perceive the services to be accessible convenient and responsive to their needs.</i>
4	Efficiency	<i>The extent to which an organisation is achieving maximal benefits with minimal resources. It is expected to be high when the benefits provided by an organisation are perceived to outweigh the costs, when unnecessary bureaucracy is avoided and when an organisation is perceived to offer value for money.</i>

The City of Melbourne's [Future Libraries Framework](#) explicitly links libraries to desirable social and economic and outcomes which underpin the three key principles driving service design and operations:

1. Incorporate Aboriginal languages, stories, cultural practice and wisdom into the design, experience and operation of our library spaces.
2. Ensure no one in the community is left behind by reaching as many residents, workers, students and visitors as possible and being responsive to their needs.
3. Continue to foster a sense of belonging to ensure our city and its community thrives ([Future Libraries Framework, p.i](#)).

In making the case for the value of public libraries, the Framework references work by consultants SGS Economics and Planning who in 2018 calculated that Victorian libraries provide a return of \$4.30 for every \$1 of investment. In the [report](#), SGS acknowledge the difficulty of measuring the benefit of public libraries in cost terms as they do not operate in the market place but use non market valuation techniques including travel cost, financial savings and contingent valuation instead. This report can be used in conjunction with the case, as well as more recent updates to explore the difficulty in measuring public value,

Further resources

Faulkner, N. and Kaufman, S. (2018), Avoiding Theoretical Stagnation: A Systematic Review and Framework for Measuring Public Value. Australian Journal of Public Administration, 77: 69-86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12251>

Future Libraries Framework 2021, City of Melbourne, melbourne.vic.gov.au, <https://mvga-prod-files.s3.ap-southeast-4.amazonaws.com/public/SiteCollectionDocuments/future-libraries-framework.pdf>

LIBRARIES WORK! The socio-economic value of public libraries to Victorians, May 2018, State Library Victoria, https://sgsep.com.au/assets/main/SGS-Economics-and-Planning_Vic-Public-Libraries_low-res.pdf

Class exercise: Discussion topics

1. Using the case study as an example, identify the different dimensions of public value that narm ngarrgu offers (or aims to).
2. How do they relate to the four domains?
3. Are there other dimensions or domains that you would include? What? Why?
4. How would you measure public value in relation to narm ngarrgu?
5. How should facilities like narm ngarrgu be funded?

3. Extension – What role should public libraries play?

Following on from discussions of public value, or as a standalone teaching session, there is the potential to explore deeper questions in relation to the role and purpose of libraries.

The following articles provide fuel for discussion in terms of what libraries can be and the gaps they are trying to cover. As the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the trend away from street-front government outlets to call centre and online transactions, many citizens have struggled to keep up. Will more turn to libraries in their absence? Meanwhile, libraries have emerged as important community builders in an era of fragmentation, polarisation and distrust. However, a recent dispute at the State Library of Victoria involving authors who voiced their support for Palestinians in Gaza highlights the challenges of playing many different roles in an increasingly politicised space. Libraries around the world have been dragged into the culture wars over their collections and programming and Australian institutions are not immune.

Although some of these articles discuss overseas settings, there are valid parallels to the Australian context.

‘The trouble comes when libraries – and the underpaid, overstretched people who work in them – start to become sole providers for all these things: when years of cost-cutting mean that the state has effectively reneged on all but the most unavoidable of its responsibilities to the troubled, the poor, the educationally challenged, the lonely, the physically unwell, the lost or the homeless.’

See- Edmariam, A. 25 Jun 2024, ‘If there’s nowhere else to go, this is where they come’: how Britain’s libraries provide much more than books. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/article/2024/jun/25/how-britains-libraries-provide-more-than-books>

As a contribution to the debate on the usefulness of public libraries, the line of argument emerging from our literature review is that libraries are needed more than ever, as some are indeed prime social innovators. We revisit the definition of a social innovation as one that creates or modifies interaction patterns within the society, and put forward the idea that these new patterns can both produce serendipitous discoveries and foster social cohesion, in an era in which some authors identify a tendency toward social disintegration (Oldenburg and Brisset, 1982; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017).

See- Desmarchelier, B., Djellal, F., & Gallouj, F. (2024). Public Libraries as Social Innovators. Public Library Quarterly, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2024.2357399>

‘There is no such thing as an apolitical cultural institution.’

'The present dispute highlights the many meanings of "library" – and the tensions between those meanings. Is a library a collection of texts? A building for books? A bundle of services? An abstract legal entity? The dispute has also highlighted questions such as who owns the library, and whom the library is for.'

See - Kells, S. 1 May 2024. The State Library of Victoria is facing a crisis. Is it time to rethink how public libraries are governed? <https://libraryplanet.net/2024/05/01/the-state-library-of-victoria-is-facing-a-crisis-is-it-time-to-rethink-how-public-libraries-are-governed/>

Discussion/essay questions

1. What role should public libraries and community hubs be playing?
2. Are institutions like narm ngarrgu effectively being forced to compensate for failures of government or society in other areas? What issues arise as a result?
3. Given the multiple roles facilities like narm ngarrgu perform (often for people well outside the local municipality) how should they be funded?
4. How can institutions like libraries better navigate political issues as and when they arise?

Feedback on Teaching Note use

To assist with continual improvement, if you've used this Teaching Note, we'd greatly appreciate your feedback and suggestions for improvement. To do so, please email caselibrary@anzsog.edu.au with the name of the case and your comments. Many thanks in advance.

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