

THE CONTINUING AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY LIBRARY DEBACLE: WHY IT'S SUCH AN IMPORTANT DEBATE.

By Linda Blincko, Creative Director, Depot Artspace



Since the shocking announcement last month that Auckland University was about to burn books in its specialist libraries there has been a deluge of collective opprobrium at what amounts to an outrageous attack on democratic values and represents the zenith of philistinism.

Professor Stuart McCutcheon, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Auckland, infers that the objections are misguided, unnecessarily disputatious and tantamount to hysteria in his recent response to the issue in the NZ Herald, April 30, 2018.

Here's an excerpt from his piece that points to a logic we often see from the upper echelons of bureaucracy where 'rationalisation' and 'streamlining' are its common currency. Bear with this brief diversion as we cite another example, Auckland Council's property and development arm, Panuku, selling off treasured and iconic landmarks to counter over-expenditure in the bureaucratic infrastructure and highly priced vanity projects.

Back to Mr. McCutcheon:

'First, let me reassure readers that the University of Auckland is in excellent heart and the idea of a "malaise" there is nonsense. Our domestic student numbers remain strong despite (or because of) our having the highest entry standards in the country. International student numbers continue to grow and we attract 7000 international students each year from more than 120 countries. We fund and produce more research publications, creative works and patents than ever....



Nor do we burn books, though we are proposing to consolidate some small libraries with the central library just a couple of hundred metres away.

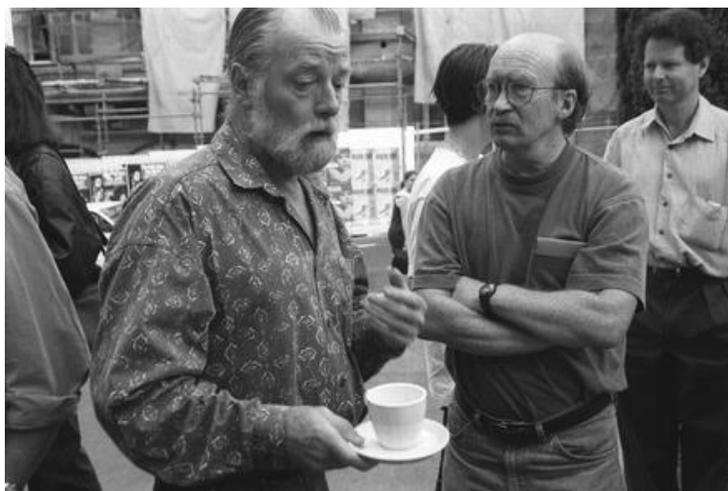
That will allow us to reduce costs of operation - a better option than reducing numbers of academic staff, which would be another alternative given our limited funding. It will also allow us to increase the hours that material is available, from the typical 49-58 hours a week in specialist libraries to 96 hours a week in the main library.

Materials that are used less often - some 700,000 items at present - are stored off campus, available at 24 hours' notice. As about 32,000 physical items (including 13,000 books) are added to the collection each year, the on-demand storage allows us to retain more books without committing scarce funds to expanding expensive in-library space.

.....It's also true that we have had to reduce staff numbers in some faculties, while at the same time increasing them in others. Over the last eight years, our total number of academic staff has increased by about 240 full-time equivalents. Where we have had to reduce numbers, it has been solely because demand from students has declined. In the Faculty of Arts, we slowed the rate of loss of staffing positions by providing an extra \$1 million of budget in each of the last two years, a fact the professors conveniently ignore.

Finally, the professors misdiagnose the problem. The fact that we run a billion-dollar public institution in a business-like manner is not the issue here. Had we failed to do that we would now be at the brink of insolvency, as a number of public tertiary institutions are.'

Source: https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12041896

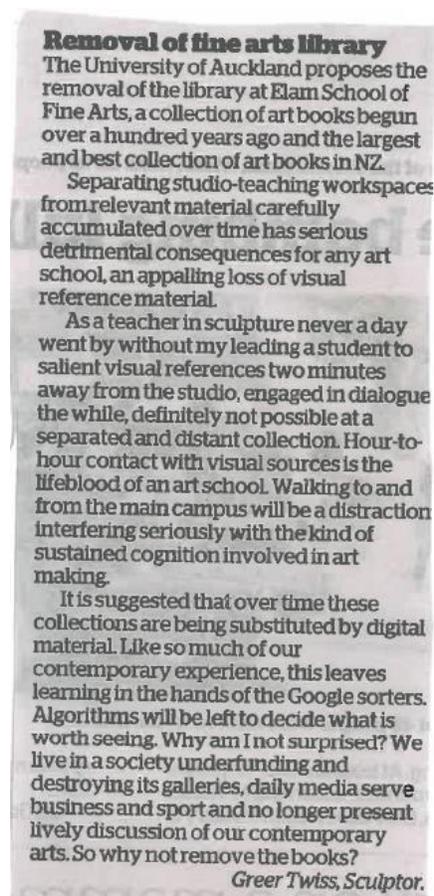


Greer Twiss centre, Peter Siddell and Richard Killeen. Photographer Gil Hanly



As a grassroots creative community we are familiar with this argument (or should I say explanation, as we generally have no recourse to address the decisions made and actions taken) which is continually directed at our sector. The imminent sale of a well-utilised local asset, the former Borough Council Chambers now used as a busy Visitors Information Centre and community hub, is a sad example. Despite protests and petitions the axe falls at the end of the month, May 31st and this important service will be relegated to a cubby hole in an otherwise unoccupied arcade. The building will become another 'development opportunity' and lost to its locals.

That is why, amidst the library debacle the letter in the NZ Herald, May 1st, by esteemed Auckland sculptor and [Cultural Icon, Greer Twiss](#) resonates so soundly with us. In this letter he brings a new light to the argument. Greer discusses the value of a specialist library apart from its accessibility to books. He is talking about developing relationships, sharing ideas, communicating wisdom and experience, in short, building a community, which is something these otherwise alienating institutions – and society in general - need for their members. Here is his letter, in full:



“Community is vital and unifying, self-sufficient and harmonious, an antidote to a fragmented, commercialised society that is fatally and contagiously diseased.”

**Robert Houriet,
 Getting Back Together, 1971**

