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POLITICS FEDERAL

## Bit of shush please, it's a library

By Nicholas Taylor and Russell Marks  
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Victoria must reconsider its place as the world's second UNESCO [City of Literature](#).

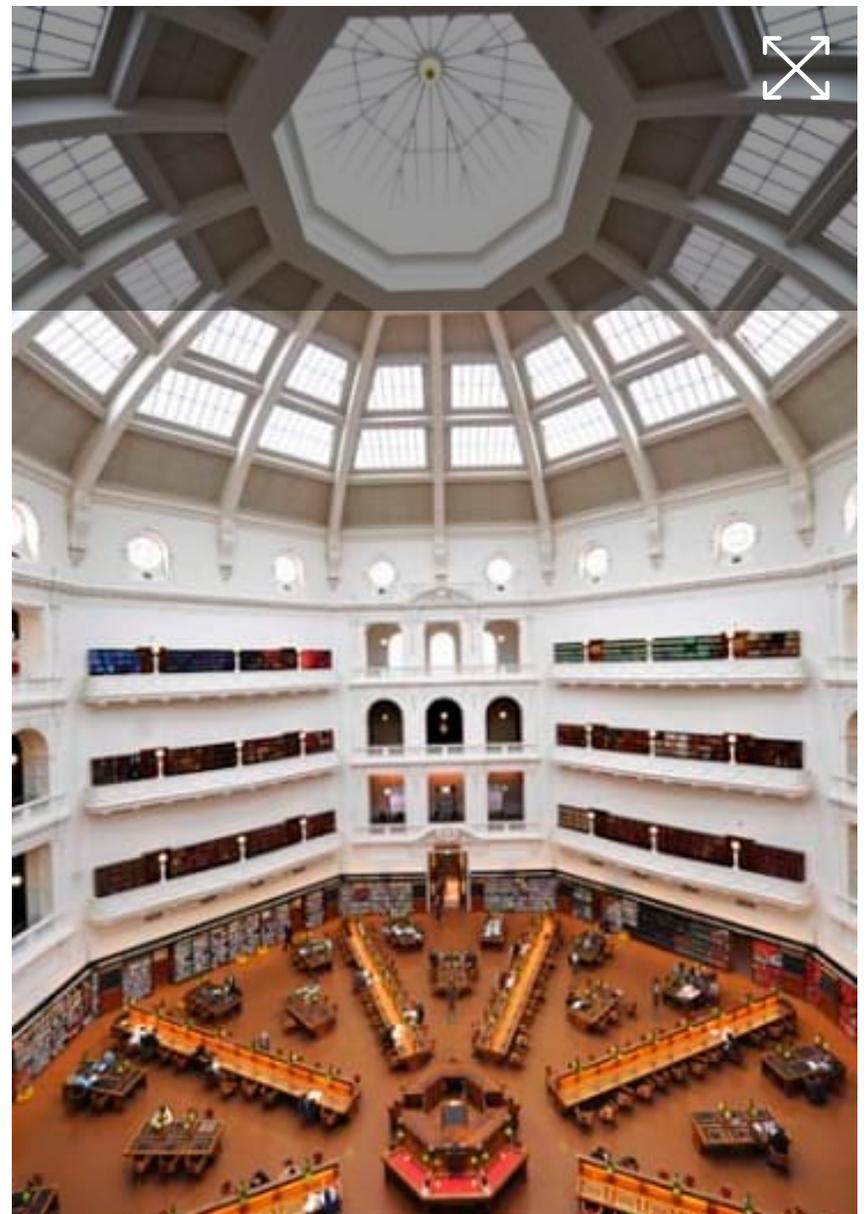


The state's historical output and culture aside, the State Library of Victoria seems to have forgotten what the primary role of a library is: a place of research and quiet study.

No more is that apparent than in the [La Trobe Reading Room](#).

Lauded as "the library's most spectacular architectural feature", the Reading Room is a 1000 square metre space within a 35-metre high dome that was the largest of its kind anywhere in the world when it opened in 1913. It is a truly remarkable space within which to read, write and contemplate. The Reading Room is also one of the State Library's "designated quiet areas, reserved for silent work and study".

Not any long. It has instead become a dome of sound.





The La Trobe Reading Room in Melbourne's State Library is no longer the quiet haven for study it once was - it's a tourist attraction.

*Photo: Jason South*



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The library not only fails to police the cacophony in the Reading Room, it actively promotes it. None of the library's nearly-350 full-time staff is stationed in the Reading Room's rather foreboding central dais (elevated desk) as was historically intended.

On the hour, guided tours shuffle around its floors and amble up the three levels, each footstep reverberating around the dome. Most attempt to remark on the obvious beauty of the space in hushed tones, but with the acoustics of an Opera House, their every word is audible.

Then there are the few who don't seem to notice that they've entered a library.

Recently, after one middle-aged woman had heard from her guide that the seats are made from "Queensland silky oak" she lent in to one of us and said, "Well then son, that means you're sitting on a piece of history!"

That very well might be, but none of what the group were doing was conducive to the area's intended purpose.

Sporadically, gaggles of schoolchildren are asked to curb their natural exploration urges and instead "engage with the library's impressive spaces, collections and history". Here's a couple of examples of what this can lead to: One child was spinning a series of chairs and tapping on desks like drums. We watched another one thunder up three flights of metal stairs and call down to his mate 35 metres below.

At certain times it is so congested as to result in near constant chatter and the

answering of phones. This is perhaps inevitable at exam times, but it seems that the clusters of students are procrastinating rather than silently studying.

In part, the noise is a merely a product of overcrowding and a lack of accessibility. The State Library is one of the few places in Melbourne's CBD – perhaps the only place – where the general public can feel comfortable "studying" in a suitable and inspiring environment. That said, it shouldn't be too much to ask for some peace and quiet in a library.

The library is also an integral part of Victoria's cultural heritage and community. There are many things it does well; the new Wheeler Centre appears to foster a steady stream of ideas, and the Mr Tulk Cafe makes for a pleasant space to enjoy a coffee.

But a library must first and foremost be a hub of learning and creativity. It must also enable the individual to be alone with his or her thoughts.

Sadly, the La Trobe Reading Room is no longer that place of study and contemplation. Instead it's become a hive of activity, all built around the marketing of its UNESCO status.

Floor-to-ceiling posters in the main entrance say: "View the dome. Visit free exhibitions." Really? The Reading Room should be a silent sanctuary for those engaging with Victoria's premier reference collection, as its architects had intended.

**Written by La Trobe University doctoral candidates Nicholas Taylor and Russell Marks from the State Library of Victoria's La Trobe Reading Room.**



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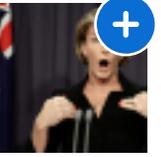
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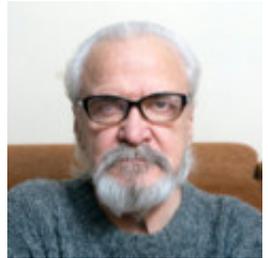
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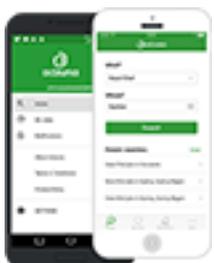


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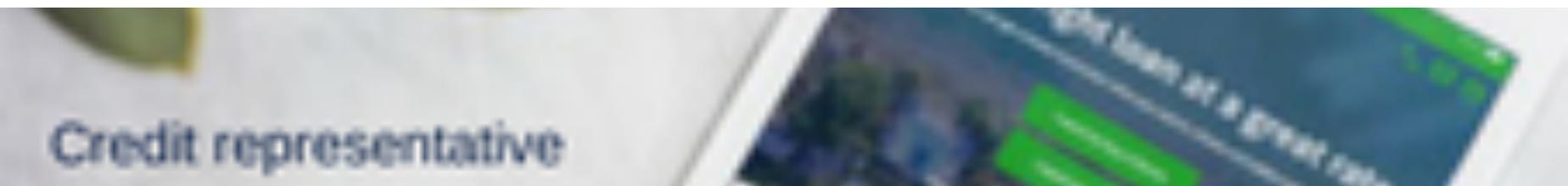


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