
A new vision for a traditional library space



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The Barnes Library is situated in the Birmingham University's Medical School building. Now over fifty years old, it serves students and staff from the Schools of Medicine, Dentistry, Health Sciences, Biosciences and Sport and Exercise Sciences. Plans by the College of Medicine and Dentistry to refurbish the rather tired foyer and entrance of this building provided an opportunity for the library and college to work together to create a new type of learning space in the area previously occupied by the ground floor of the library.

As well as wanting to provide a stylish and functional new entrance to one of the flagship campus buildings, the college aspired to give more prominence and visibility to its academic and pastoral support services for students. Because the project was to be a joint one with Academic Services (the parent department of Library Services) the original concept included the idea of a single reception desk staffed by both College and Library Services staff, providing a single point of access for students and visitors.

Library Services wanted to provide more open and easily accessible study spaces, to review and refocus the print collections and to highlight the work of the subject adviser team, who before the refurbishment were on the first floor in an office hidden behind rows of shelving.

The original library entrance was a door leading off the back of the main foyer of the Medical School. The library covers four floors, with one main entrance on the ground floor. On the origi-

nal ground floor were information and reception desks at the entrance, access control, current book-stock, an open access short loan collection and around 84 traditional study spaces at large tables. Other floors contained substantial back runs of periodicals, more study spaces, a small computer cluster and group study rooms.

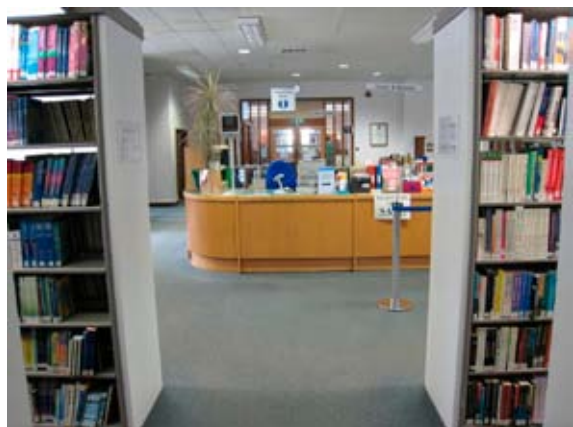


Barnes entrance

maximised light and created a visual flow from the entrance right to the back of the floor, using a feature ceiling which also acted as an acoustic baffle to minimise the sound in what was previously a very echoey area. A reception desk at the main entrance replaced the rather forbidding uniformed security presence, and access control barriers with a swipe-card function were introduced.



Foyer



Shelves and desk

The aspiration to provide a single desk for both library and student support functions proved more problematic. The requirement to maintain security of library collections via 3M detection gates and the Sentry access control system, without putting another barrier across the space, led to several versions of the plans, and the design phase seemed to drag on interminably. Finally, however, agreement was reached, and compromises accepted. The student services desk and the library desks mirror each other physically, but function separately. Although a compromise on the original idea of the one-stop shop for students, it was much more practical from a management point of view. The library and student support teams have many things in common, but staffing structures and working practices are different. With the two desks, staff are developing a close working relationship but maintaining their separate identities, and students have no problem directing their queries to the correct team.



Ground floor bookshelves

Local architects Glancy Nicholls were appointed to design the new space, with a brief to open up the foyer area to create a welcoming and striking entrance to the building, as well as to maintain security in a building which is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. They created a design which

Preparatory work for the refurbishment included a major stock review and consultation exercise. The project coincided with the launch of the Library Content Plan, a major review of stock across the whole of Library Services, in preparation for the move to a new Main Library building in 2016. The main impact in the Barnes Library was the retrospective cataloguing of large quantities of outdated monograph stock that was housed in the basement; this allowed us to consult properly with academic staff, and finally to dispose of much of it, with the rest going to the

remote store or to Special Collections. There is still work to do on our print periodicals collection, but the monographs have now been thoroughly reviewed, and we hope that comments about out-of-date stock will disappear from this year's NSS results.

Casual staff did much of the work of moving the remaining stock. The monograph stock had to be moved twice, first to temporary shelving in the basement, and then again later to its new home on the first floor. Periodicals stock was then moved to the basement to the space vacated by the older redundant monograph stock. It felt as if every item in the library had been moved at least once, and library staff certainly had the muscles to prove it!

The refurbishment work itself started in July 2011 and was completed in two phases, with the foyer and entrance being ready at the end of August. The handover date for the library slipped, and the space was finally ready to be occupied in mid-January 2012. While the refurbishment work was going on, the library remained open on the other three floors, and we established a temporary entrance on the first floor. While very cramped and rather hot, this area functioned well for the duration of the refurbishment, although it had never been intended to continue in use during the busy autumn term. We couldn't use access control, but we did manage to relocate our old 3M security gates to protect stock during the interim period.

Glancy Nichols worked with the university's Learning Spaces Division to develop their vision and create the final design for a large ground-floor learning suite co-located with other library functions. This study area has been named the Doug Ellis Suite, in acknowledgment of a very generous donation from Sir Doug Ellis. The learning suite includes a range of custom-made seating pods and tables, giving students the ability to work as individuals or in groups. There is a small PC cluster, and the area is covered by the wireless network throughout. The need for this sort of space within the college is demonstrated by the fact that even on the quietest days, there are always students working there. Eating and drinking policy in this area is more relaxed than in the library area.



Doug Ellis suite

Students enter the library itself via access control barriers which use the Sentry Isis system. This is the first installation at Birmingham to use both in and out swipe barrier; this gives us occupancy data for the library and fascinating new management data about how the library space is actually being used, and will enable us to monitor changing trends. Once into the library space, users have access to a high-demand collection comprising short- and one-week-loan books on the ground floor. A staircase leads to the other three floors of the library, which remain unchanged for the present.



New library desk



New library entrance



High demand collection.

The subject adviser team has moved downstairs into a new office adjacent to the new learning suite; as the team is now much more visible to students, the caseload of individual support appointments with students has increased. The subject advisers share a new suite of bookable interview rooms with the student support staff.

The before and after photos show what a major transformation this has been, and students and staff have been impressed by the design and the improved facilities. We hope that this will be just the first phase of a larger project to refurbish the Barnes Library completely, although plans and funding are not confirmed yet. However, it is clear that there is an increasing demand for high-quality study space, and that students really appreciate this type of development.