
The SCONUL Library Design Awards 2010

Sheila Cannell
Chair, Working Group on Space Planning

During July 2010 members of the SCONUL Working Group on space planning criss-crossed the UK and Ireland to visit the eighteen entrants for this year's Library Design Award. In order to have a robust judging process, groups formed and re-formed across the country. We all met *in camera* for a day in early August to assess the visits and to decide on the winners. It was a long and intense day, but our views were unanimous about the winning libraries. I should like to pay tribute to all my colleagues on the SCONUL Working Group on Space Planning, who had a busy summer. I should also like to thank the SCONUL office for their help in making the arrangements.

The eligible libraries had been completed between January 2006 and December 2008, so the group was visiting libraries between eighteen months and four-and-a-half years after completion. We found the state of library building in the UK and Ireland to be very healthy, with many outstanding libraries.

We visited the libraries in July 2010, so we did not see the buildings under busy conditions, but we did hear about how the new buildings were being well used. We regularly heard the phrases 'the library has become a destination on campus'. We also heard talk of the 'busiest year ever' or 'busiest day ever'. It is clear that students respond to the new spaces being made available to them by using the library in greater numbers. This can create problems: at the time of design, estates departments do not believe that there will be increases in use of up to 50%, because that does not happen in other building they are involved with; however, this is sometimes the case with libraries.

Students show their pleasure in new space by using it and using it well. They also give the libraries higher scores, often startlingly higher scores, in the National Student Survey library question in the year or years after completion of the new facility.

One very clear trend in this year's judging was the prevalence of refurbishments or refurbishments plus extension. There were few new buildings, and for this reason the Information Commons in Sheffield stands as a beacon. As we move into more difficult financial times, the ability to redevelop space for new needs will become more important. Almost all our winners were redevelopments. They ranged from the major refurbishment plus extension at Leicester, which feels like a new build because of the cleverness of the design, to the imaginative use of the Drill Hall by the Universities of Medway, which takes very unusual space and turns it into a fine and flexible library. The winner of the Small Library Award at Cardiff is for a much more modest but aspirational development for science subjects, which completely transforms one floor of an existing building, but leaves the rest of the building unchanged.

The Working Group on Space Planning organises an annual series of seminars on themes in academic library buildings. Our next such seminar will be in April (date yet to be confirmed) at the University of Leicester, when the theme will be 'Evolving libraries' and we shall consider how libraries can use and develop existing space, retain flexibility to respond to new demands and consider low-cost solutions to developing space. There will also be an opportunity to visit the University of Leicester Library—in what SCONUL used to call a 'critical visit'.

Flexibility has always been an important part of library design, and we saw evidence of organic design which allowed easy, or easier, change to meet changing demand; for example, exchanging book space for extra study space, changing the nature of study space, or making changes to services – with many libraries saying that they had already made significant changes. Many libraries that set out to be completely flexible, however, fail in this regard, because the air-handling or environmental systems are not as flexible as they might be.

Power and data-handling remain issues – we all know we could move that floor box, but are charged a lot of money to do so. Cabling remains a problem for libraries and, in my view, will do so until we have 'wireless power'. There are now some technologies which we take as given – pervasive wireless, innovation in self-service, and we may want to raise the bar for the next award and look for real innovation in these technological areas.

One of the criteria we had set this year was that the libraries should be environmentally sensitive. In fact we found that they were almost universally so, and that all the buildings – within their particular constraints – addressed green issues, from air-handling to water control to lighting to recycling. Almost all had BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) rating. Not all can achieve 'excellent' – this is very difficult for refurbishments, which tend to aspire to be 'very good'. For the next round of judging, we think that this particular bar will have to be set higher.

What is clear is that all the winners have a very close fit to their organisational mission, and that they have worked closely with their stakeholder groups to provide libraries that fit that mission. More than that, however, the best libraries feed back into the university mission and influence that mission through what has been accomplished in the new build. We heard several times of how the new library was feeding into the university's learning and research strategies, and that innovative solutions which had been developed for the library were being adopted in other parts of the university. Perhaps on a lighter note, it also seems a regular occurrence that the library's colour scheme and furniture are adopted in other parts of the university.

At the time of the last award, an important consideration was the provision of variety in types of study space, including plenty of social study space. This remains important, with group study, cafés and casual seating still much in evidence. However, if anything, there is some evidence of a resurgence of quieter, more individual study space. This is in response to student demand, and is perhaps in response to the need to work harder. We see that some of the libraries judged for the award have already had to change some spaces in response to this need.

As ever, we have found that librarians love interior design, and, in particular, experimenting with interesting chairs! We saw some great chairs on our travels. We do advocate that it is very important for librarians to fight to get a generous furniture budget – all too often this is left until the end, and the library cannot get the robust, hard-wearing quality furniture which is needed, because all the money has been spent on infrastructure. Students are hard on furniture, and if it is not of high quality, it will need to be replaced sooner rather than later. We need to keep stressing the life-cycle cost of getting good furniture. Since

our visits covered libraries that had been open for between one-and-a-half and four-and-a-half years, we could see variation in the robustness of the furniture that had been chosen.

The best libraries make you say 'wow' as you enter them – and all of our winning libraries have that 'wow factor'. We did notice – perhaps with some surprise – that refurbishments can have just as much of a wow factor as new builds. Refurbished buildings often have been given an extension, sometimes small, but usually built from glass, which serves to introduce light and create greater links to the outside world.

At the time of the last award we highlighted that few libraries seemed to be paying as much attention to their staff spaces as to their student spaces. We saw some evidence of better staff spaces, for example at Cork, but this is still an area where the scores are consistently lower than other areas. Staff space is not as innovative as it might be, and we have a lot to learn from what companies like Google provide for their staff – albeit at a much higher budget than we have. For many of our users the services delivered out of our libraries to their desktops are more important than those delivered in the building, so I hope that those who are working on libraries now are thinking about this.

During the judging, one word that regularly came up, particularly in connection with the winning libraries, was 'thoughtful'. We found that librarians, working in a team together with their estates departments, architects and design teams, were influencing the library building in thoughtful and considered ways. I think that there are some places where this close relationship does not happen, and that the librarian is less involved in the process than they would wish. In the best libraries, the librarian and library staff are closely involved, influencing every decision and ensuring that close attention is paid to the small details which will make the building operate well.

People are key – people with a vision of how a library service can change through a new building. We found all the people we visited were immensely proud of their new libraries. In one way we are sorry that there have to be winners, because overall, all the buildings this year are winners – there is great design, great thought, great passion and great vision about what the library is. Our users acknowledge this in the way they are using the new libraries – it is certainly the case that 'library as place' is alive and well.

WINNERS OF THE SCONUL DESIGN AWARDS 2010:

Winner, Large Design Award

David Wilson Library, University of Leicester



This library is a benchmark library, creating an exceptional learning environment. It is a complete remodelling and extension of a 1970s building, creating a single library functioning as a new build. The library reinforces the traditional library in a modern context. The new space has allowed development in the service and creates flexibility for future development. The development is very closely aligned with the organisational mission of the University of Leicester, and there has been stakeholder involvement with the project. The stakeholders are very happy, even emotionally engaged with the outcomes, evidenced in a high increase in the score in the National Student Survey.

Winner, Small Design Award

Trevithick Library, University of Cardiff



This small library, serving science schools, is a radical remodelling of an existing library, completed in 2008, and forms the first part of strategy to remodel library space to match new needs. Despite its small size, it has clever use of space, with zoning, and retains the possibility of flexibil-



ity for the future. The lighting, environment and furniture are exemplary. An innovative approach was taken to funding, seeking sponsorship from the companies with links to the academic departments. These companies not only provided funds, but also artworks that enliven the surroundings. The library demonstrates what can be achieved with a small budget and big ambitions.

HIGHLY COMMENDED AWARDS
*New Postgraduate Research Library,
 University College Cork*



This is an extension and remodelling of a 1980s building, creating an extraordinary environment that works well for its audience. The building is linked to its environment and to the rest of the

campus through the clever use of materials. The atrium has a wonderful sense of light, making an impressive entrance to the building. There is a strong fit to organisational mission and the library is a key element of the university's academic life and provides outreach to the local community. There is a particular emphasis on sustainability in the building.

Drill Hall Library, Universities at Medway



This is an innovative library service, which brings together service from three universities: Greenwich, Kent and Canterbury Christ Church. The library is on a new campus at Chatham Maritime (the site of the Royal Naval Barracks). This space presents particular challenges centred on retaining the feature character of the original building while creating spaces to meet modern library and learning needs. The building speaks to its past as a drill hall built in 1902 and blends this with its new role with ease. It is believed to be the longest library in Europe. The staff and users are passionate about the space and the history of the building. The library created is open plan, fluid and flexible in response to new demands.

Information Commons, Sheffield

When it opened in 2007, the Information Commons set a new standard in learning spaces. With a 'wow' factor, both inside and outside, it provides a wide variety of learning environments. The innovative service delivery was created as a collaboration of the library and computing services, but the Information Commons has created its own distinctive identity. The development was closely integrated into university strategy, is a place for experimentation and has led the whole university to be innovative in learning. Student satisfaction with the Information Commons is high, evidenced in comments and in the National Student Survey results.