

Principles of Library Design

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‘Books do furnish a room.’ wrote Anthony Powell in 1971. Thirty-five years later, the library may remain the room of books, but now it may be the learning resource centre, the research space or the ideas store, and the librarian’s challenge is surely that of providing a congenial space for both staff and users that is complementary to the building, that incorporates the latest IT equipment and that complies with all current legislation, with particular emphasis on the requirements of the DDA (Disability Discrimination Act).

A successful design process must begin with a dialogue between all parties. Every library is unique, and without the input of the library staff, and ideally, some of the users, the particular needs of what may well be a very complex space could be overlooked. A brief survey should be carried out with questionnaires for staff and users to establish how present services could be improved. This feedback,

together with an analysis of factors such as circulation figures, computer use, reader spaces and the day-to-day flow of people around the library should help to establish the basis for the furniture layout. The key aspects of the layout should include storage and display of stock, IT/multimedia facilities, type of issue system, number and type of reader spaces, access (especially disabled access), sightlines and security. It is vital to involve the library supplier as early as possible in the design process, attending meetings with management, staff and user groups, as well as those with architects and interior designers.

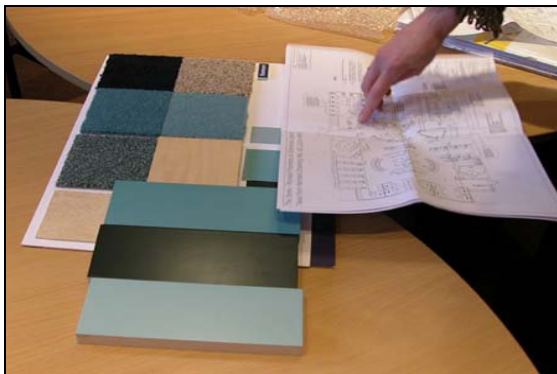
Practical issues as listed above are vital, but equally important is the whole ambience of the library, which might dictate the overall layout and the type of materials used. Please see the case studies at the end of the article.



Eton College

Michael Serota is the third generation of the Serota family which has been producing fine furniture since the early 1900s. He has over 30 years’ experience in refurbishment and contemporary library installations.

The type of materials used can have possibly the greatest impact on the overall 'feel' of the library. Timbers with an open grain such as oak or ash tend to be associated with a more classic, traditional style, whereas lighter woods such as maple or beech can give a much more contemporary look, particularly when used in conjunction with contrasting painted, metal or glass elements. Careful attention should also be paid to the style of chairs in the library, and to the colour and type of fabric used in the upholstery.



Selecting materials, Richards Butler

The 1840s galleried libraries of Lincoln's Inn and the Taylorian Institute (Oxford) both required quite drastic revamping of the counter areas. At Lincoln's Inn, the gothic arch detail of the windows, doors and shelving was incorporated into the counter and staff desks. The Taylorian Institute was offered a counter and bookcases in either a contrasting contemporary design or a traditional panelled style. The 'safer' option of the panelled furniture was chosen, but whilst the design was in keeping with its 19th century surroundings, the counter allowed for 21st century technology with facilities for housing computers and desensitisers.

A mixture of more contemporary materials is shown to good effect in the Knowledge Centre for Richards Butler. Working closely with the interior designer, who was very explicit in the design required for the library, the furniture was contemporary and curved, with a pleasing mixture of maple veneers, ends and backs painted

blue, chocolate brown metal shelves and brushed aluminium skirting.

Providing adequate comfortable working space for all staff should be a priority in any library design. If possible, a professional ergonomist should be consulted, but certainly ergonomically designed chairs should be budgeted for, and the heights and depths of issue desks in relation to upstands and computer screen placement should be checked. A well designed desk should minimize overstretching and help prevent the all too common lower back pain.

With regard to security, devices such as security systems, CCTV and mirrors may play an important role, but a great deal can be achieved by paying close attention to sightlines - something of particular importance to librarians who work with little or no assistance. The positioning of the sole librarian's desk at the Policy Studies Institute, enabling her to offer assistance to users and to have good sight lines was one of the most crucial parts of the design.

Changing user needs with regard to IT and other modern technology have had the greatest impact upon library design in recent years. Books may be integrated with computer stations or information points, and the balance between stock and reader/IT spaces should be considered carefully. More seating and study areas may be required, and the potential users of such spaces should be considered when selecting the furniture; for example, the needs of a teenager and a 'silver surfer' in terms of height and firmness of chair may be very different.

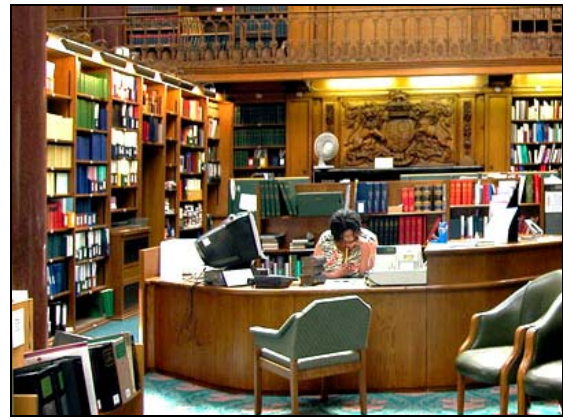
Incorporating the latest media and hardware may present additional problems of space, but devices such as rise-and-fall mechanisms for flat screens can free up valuable desk space for readers. When space is at a premium it is often difficult to deal with material such as journals, but it is usually possible to store back copies of

periodicals on flat shelves behind the display shelf, or to use end-of-bay holders for new publications and leaflets.

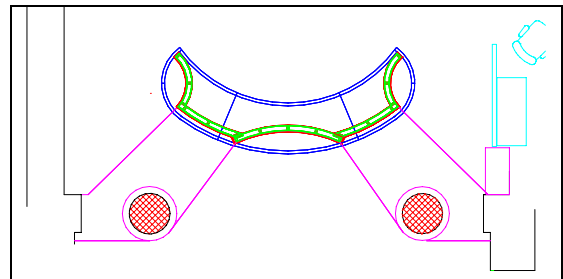
Automated issue and return systems may obviate the need for a formal library counter, and may also change the nature of the work of the library staff on duty there. The Eastman Dental Institute decided to modernise its service by moving over to a self-issue system, and new furniture was required to reflect the new use of the library. By working closely with the librarian, it was established that there was a need for an area of the desk where the library staff could give reader support in a more informal and relaxed way, and so an extended circular top was incorporated at one end.

Access to and around the library must be compliant with both health and safety issues and the DDA. Aisle widths are of paramount importance for wheelchair users, and furniture such as issue desks with recessed fronts and rise-and-fall tables should be included. Tiffin School were aware of the importance of the DDA requirements and aisle widths and clearance between loose furniture of 1200mm were established. The Law Society library, housed in a Grade 2 listed building, required a new issue desk which met health and safety regulations and complied with the DDA. The use of an overhanging convex curved top combined with concave front and side elements maximised space for wheelchair access.

In this period of transition from the printed word to online text, the library is evolving like never before. However, by recognising the potential of all the new technology yet respecting the concept of the 'room furnished with books', it should be possible to achieve well-designed inspirational spaces that reflect changing user needs, and enable us to say, to paraphrase Prospero, that 'our library is dukedom large enough'.



The Law Society, prior to the refurbishment



Plan of The Law Society issue desk



The Law Society after refurbishment

CASE STUDY: Royal Society of Medicine

The Royal Society of Medicine, as a library with a historic tradition, faced the challenge of wanting a modern and functional library which was also sympathetic to the interior of the building. The existing shelving was rather dated and needed refurbishing, and also needed something to tie it in with the design of the new shelving. With introduction of coloured back panels to both the existing shelving and the new furniture, a continuity of style was achieved linking traditional and contemporary design.

The journal display and storage area was revamped with custom made double-sided units fitted with perspex journal holders mounted on panels above open shelf units for housing the back issues. A prototype display panel was produced to show how relatively small intervals between holders allowed a full view of the face of each journal. The supporting ledges of the journal holders were increased to 30mm to accommodate the thickest of publications.

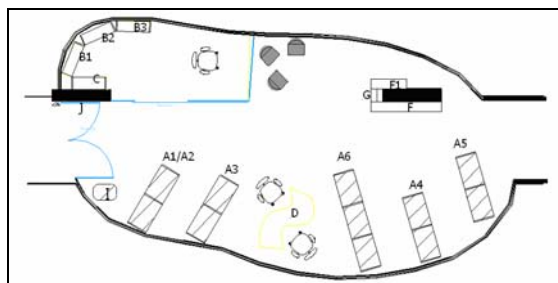
Once the spacing had been approved the design could then be incorporated into the floor plan and the details of the styling were drawn up and submitted for approval by the client and architect. All this took time and emphasised the need for adequate planning, particularly when dealing with refurbishment projects where the interior of the building has a bearing on the aesthetics of the furniture.



Royal Society of Medicine

CASE STUDY: Policy Studies Institute

The Policy Studies Institute moved to an irregular-shaped glass-walled library in a new building for which we designed contemporary furniture to complement the unusual space.



Plan of Policy Studies Institute

With a fire exit running the length of the library and taking up approximately one fifth of the area, usable floor space was

restricted and maintaining clear access through the body of the library provided quite a challenge. By introducing diagonal banks of shelving for books and journals in a chevron configuration separated by a serpentine shaped desk, the optimum use of the space could be achieved.

Some of the researchers' desks were positioned against the outer walls which compromised their privacy. After the furniture was installed we were asked back to address the problem, which we resolved with the application of frosted film to the glass which created a degree of privacy for researchers and other library users alike without compromising the light and open feel.