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16 Re-imagining the University Library – a Transformative Opportunity

Abstract: The past twenty years have seen transformative change in academic library design. This paper describes the development of the Glucksman Library at the University of Limerick (UL) in Ireland. The present library was designed in two phases with a student-focused 1998 design iteration and a 2018 development that adopted emerging technologies to enable knowledge creation and facilitate data-intensive research and digital scholarship. The paper explores the collaboration undertaken in terms of the space, design process and service development.

Keywords: Library planning; Learning; Digital libraries; Collaboration

Introduction

The University of Limerick’s inspiring New Glucksman Library (Figure 16.1), designed to transform the Library and University for scholarship in a digital age, opened in September 2018.

The dynamic new library has been dramatically extended and reimagined with a sequence of interlinked, handsome, well-lit and beautifully proportioned spaces, each with a distinctive character allowing for mood change and multiple uses, from the quiet traditional study space to much more vibrant and technology-infused studio spaces. The design of the new library evolved over a twenty-year period during which the library experienced a faster and more disruptive pace of change than any place on campus as it responded to a diverse and complex digital landscape.

1990s Design

The master plan for a new library, developed by Geoff Freedman from Shepley Bulfinch and Hugh Murray from MOLA in 1994, proposed a four-wing purposely designed library facility sited at the centre of the campus to be implemented in two phases. Library Phase 1 was completed in 1998 with a design that included many of the innovative features of 1990s library design. During this period, learning, student engagement and the incorporation of information technology emerged as essential features. The design for the new library at the University of



Figure 16.1: Southern elevation, University of Limerick (photo by University of Limerick).

Limerick included an information commons, group study rooms, power and data at all desks, WIFI everywhere, multiple service points, extensive use of compact shelving and a library café. Although the design was increasingly learner-focused and incorporated technology in the learning spaces, the design remained strongly print focused.

Further investment was made in 2011 to deal with acoustic transfer concerns, a common problem in 1990s library design, and to facilitate the reorganisation of library spaces to deliver more effectively study areas that enable silent, quiet and collaborative work. New developments such as RFID, self-service facilities, merging of service points and extended un-serviced opening hours were adopted. These initiatives maximised the effective use of the space available but the continued growth in student numbers led to shortage of space which continued to be a serious problem.

2010s Design

The Library master plan was revised in 2006 for inclusion in a Public Private Partnership (PPP) by Alexander How from Shepley Bulfinch, with an emphasis on more space for students and collections. A draft design by Conor Pitman from RMJM was completed but the process, long delayed, was cancelled in 2011 as

a consequence of a deteriorating economic situation. Funding to recommence building was secured in early 2016 but it was clear that library design had changed significantly in the intervening years.

That decade saw an intensification of change with new academic libraries adopting emerging technologies to enable knowledge creation and the development of studio spaces designed to facilitate data-intensive research and digital scholarship. The role of libraries was extended as social and cultural spaces hosting exhibitions and events for the campus and the larger community. The focus on learning continued with technology-rich learning spaces to encourage learning in new ways and enable experimentation in curricular development. In all, these new signature academic library buildings presented a new and dynamic model of library that was closely aligned to university objectives.



Figure 16.2: Variety of study space (photo by University of Limerick).

Collaborative Design Process

A full review of building plans and advances in library design was undertaken in 2016 by a cross campus design team. The design team comprised a broad range of stakeholders including students, faculty, staff from Estates, IT and the Library, and a team from RKD Architects. Study visits to new library buildings were made and had a very significant impact on the design process. Iconic new library build-

ings presented ambitious and innovative approaches to learning and research and inspired new roles for the library that were having a significant impact on university experience. The visits also brought a sense of expectation and importance to the project and a realisation that this was a once-in-a-generation opportunity to be involved in something radical and innovative.

The visits persuaded senior university representatives to champion a transformative design and take a strong role in supporting the inclusion of spaces for digital scholarship, collaborative learning, and community engagement. Faculty representatives saw opportunities for such new spaces to impact teaching and research but also the potential that event spaces could have in enhancing extra-classroom experience.

The student voice was a critical aspect of the design process and students’ views at discussions and on study visits had significant influence on the final design. Students were very clear on the requirements for excellent study spaces for quiet and silent study, with a preference for booth-type study desks and for comfortable seating (Figures 16.2, 16.3 and 16.4). They also identified a need for collaborative study booths, more group study rooms and lounge seating. Students were directly involved in the selection of furniture by voting for preferred items at a furniture fair. The design team developed a clear perspective that good quality space design matters and that such space inspires attention, exploration and creativity.



Figure 16.3: Collaborative meeting space (photo by University of Limerick).

Design Principles

The Design Team was certain that the design for the new library required a transformative response to the nexus of change in information provision, pedagogy, research practice and reader behaviour. In responding to these digital and social developments, the design needed to align clearly with University objectives and seek to use new spaces as a catalyst for advancing research and learning. The design should incorporate the transition from a print-based concept with services added on to one based on the growing evidence of the important relationships between the library and learning. It should also incorporate the concept of library space as a platform for research to support new forms of digital scholarship. Collections should not dominate the design but there was an intention that browsing collections would be presented in a manner to increase use. The design should maximise the role library space has in fostering academic and cultural engagement and opportunity for interdisciplinary interaction.



Figure 16.4: Lounge seating (photo by University of Limerick).

The design team expected that the design would draw on aspects of design from libraries of antiquity with space for the exchange of ideas, and from traditional libraries with space for solitary scholarship, but also introduce new ways of thinking about space and technology with a view to inevitable change. The

over-arching principles were that libraries are changing rapidly; any design is for the present; and spaces will be used differently in the future. These principles resulted in the following design objectives:

- Leverage UL’s tradition for innovation by providing technology-rich spaces with advanced computing, collaboration and communication tools to enhance scholarly traditions.
- Build on scholarly library traditions with more quiet and silent space focused on reflective study.
- Enable project and group work and interdisciplinary activity with flexible co-working spaces and equipment.
- Extend the library’s traditional role as a hub of learning with facilities for creative digitally-enabled scholarship, exploration and creation of new knowledge.
- Make our unique and distinct collections more visible to the community and more easily accessible for research and research led teaching.
- Provide collection storage for current and future needs.

Building Features

The library enjoys natural light and wonderful outlook with a series of double height spaces and glazed walls that mean floors are interlinked vertically, thus ensuring a sense of communication between all areas and all levels. The central stairway and lightwell act as connectors between all levels and spaces. Great effort was made to eliminate corridors in the traditional sense, creating useful spaces which incorporate a series of break-out spaces, some quiet and calm, some busy and vibrant. These design features open reading rooms up to offer a dynamic quality, each with its own character.

The placing of a new entrance in a central location has been critical to ensuring that the building operates as a single entity and not two distinct old and new elements (Figure 16.5). The new entrance marks the formal entrance to the building and also provides, very successfully, a visual link to tie the original and new parts together in a seamless manner. Allied to the entrance is a series of spaces which allow users the opportunity to interact with the facility in terms of orientation and understanding while providing access to key services and community spaces.

Adjacent to the entrance, a consultation zone and information commons provide a flexible information and engagement space with a range of services in one place for ease of access, including Library, Information Technology, Disability, Peer Advisors and visiting services. A media wall is provided to showcase UL research and student achievements and enable pop-up events.



Figure 16.5: Linking old and new (photo by University of Limerick).

Also located at the entrance level is a revitalised and expanded Special Collections area including exhibition, reading, presentation and digitisation spaces to support the use of the library's unique resources. Specialist climate-controlled, world-class storage facilities are provided to ensure special collections are guaranteed a safe and secure environment. The extended café and adjacent social lobby provide opportunities for social interaction, one-to-one and small group gatherings, as well as informal, short duration study.

Central to the building is a spine which contains the book retrieval system (Figure 16.6). The initial concept for collection storage was compact shelving to allow the return of all books stored off-site. This solution was space-intensive and provided little growth space for collections. The development of an automated retrieval system released valuable floor space for study desks and provided significant storage capacity for future collection growth.

The dedicated Digital Scholarship Studio provides a suite of open technology-rich spaces that bring together tools and staff to enable engagement with digital scholarship. A production space provides audio and video editing, 3D and maker services as well as a practice presentation space. A data visualisation studio and data analysis laboratory are provided for data-intensive work. Librarians, archivists, faculty and IT professionals offer consultations, instruction, and expertise on the use of digital technologies for scholarly communication, data management, use and visualisation, 3D printing, multimedia production and digitisation. The Graduate Commons is designed specifically for postgraduate students,



Figure 16.6: Automated storage (photo by University of Limerick).

faculty and researchers with a mix of single and collaborative study spaces, computer workstations, and social interactive space. An adjacent space is reserved for faculty use.

The library houses a variety of meeting and event spaces including two information technology training rooms, five meeting rooms and 25 group study rooms. An Innovation space is designed as an active learning space to encourage creativity, innovation and problem-solving. With flexible furniture, it can be configured for a variety of research, teaching and collaborative activities. An Appellate Courtroom with full recoding and broadcasting facilities and the Popular Reading Room provide spaces for large group events.

Collaboration Integrated in New Library Design

A defining feature of new academic libraries is the opportunities they provide for developing cross-campus collaborative relationships. Their very design positions the library as a partner with faculty and researchers in digital scholarship projects, digitising resources for research and developing library-based classes. There is opportunity for space-based programme partner relationships with

campus organisations such as learning centres, student engagement services and the Alumni Office. The technology-infused spaces encourages collaborative relationships with instructional designers, data researchers, librarians, archivists and programmers. The library could easily capitalise on new spaces by developing alliances with others on campus to deliver specialist training. There are many opportunities to use library space to curate events or to support with unique resources and exhibition campus events. It is difficult for any one unit to respond to the many opportunities new library spaces present. The library, by opening its doors to collaborative partnerships that can best be conducted in these new spaces, will enable more effective use of space and improved skills development. Indeed it may be that these collaborations will lead to the next iteration of library design.

Conclusion

The new Glucksman Library, a creative space for learning and research at the heart of the University of Limerick campus, fosters learning and scholarship and addresses the changing needs of students, faculty and researchers in the digital age. Its design history tracks the transformation of academic library design over the past two decades. Libraries have been and are designed for a future of constant and rapid change. The only constant is to maintain close alignment with university needs, to keep an open mind and to constantly re-evaluate and rethink our library spaces.

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