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Evolution and transformation: spaces, services and staircases

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Abstract:

Singapore Management University's Li Ka Shing Library was designed in 2002 and built prior to 2005. It was officially opened in 2006 as part of a brand new university in the city with the two Singapore cultural icons on each side, the Singapore Art Museum and the Singapore National Museum overlooking the Campus Green with its heritage trees. The six storey building houses the library that occupies four storeys, with levels one and two housing various businesses, cafes and restaurants and other campus facilities. The growth in student numbers coupled with the changing needs and expectations of today's student population and the outdated design features have prompted the library and the university management to begin a master planning exercise. The scope of the master planning process and the journey itself presented both expected and unexpected outcomes in terms of raising awareness of space use, realignment of library operations, user involvement, service re-design, multi-purpose spaces usable by a variety of user groups, commercial use of spaces, fund raising, and political and strategic alliances across the university.

Keywords: Singapore Management University (SMU), library design, library master planning, academic libraries

1 INTRODUCTION

Singapore Management University (SMU) is only thirteen years old, having been mooted in 1997 by Dr Tony Tan, the present President of Singapore who was the then Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore at the time and other visionaries. It was established in 2000 at the Bukit Timah Campus, as the third university in Singapore after National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University. The present campus was built on land given to the university by the Singapore government at the heart of the city from 2002 to 2005 and officially opened in 2006. SMU was conceived as an American-style university offering a broad-based education, in contrast to Singapore's tradition of the more British model at the time. There are now more local and foreign universities in Singapore.

The library building, named after its donor Dr Li Ka Shing, a Hong Kong business man is one of six buildings built in close proximity to each other around the Bugis – Bras Basah district. The other five

buildings house the six Schools (Business, Law, Accountancy, Information Systems, Economics and Social Sciences) and administration. The current student population comprises of about 7,000 undergraduate and 1,000 post-graduate students. Food and beverage establishments, venues for student activities, clubs and societies, the gym and car parks are under the buildings, occupying level 1 and the basement. As Singapore is a densely populated city state, space is at a premium and real estate is an expensive resource. Consequently many organisations make the most of spaces above and below existing buildings. SMU's 'own MRT' (metro) station is right below the Library. So, the library is located at the heart of the university both physically and intellectually, and is accessible by all the Schools surrounding it, and near the cafes and student activity areas.

2. LI KA SHING LIBRARY SPACE

SMU Library building occupies both a strategic and beautiful space, the exterior of the building and the vista from the windows look attractive. The louvered windows facing Campus Green with its heritage trees and fountains permit a great deal of natural light and allow for views of the surrounding arts and cultural district, with the two cultural icons on each side - the Singapore Art Museum and the Singapore National Museum. Students often comment about the natural light on all floors of the library being one of its most appealing features. Two skylight features on levels 4 and 5 provide additional natural light even though they also present challenges in terms of traffic flow, usable spaces and seating for students.

The library is very popular amongst students. Gate count for library visitors has been increasing every year, in particular over the last two years. It went up by 21% from 2011 to 2012. In the last twelve months, the turnstile figures showed almost one million visitors. There are increasing numbers of days during term time when daily entrance figures reach over 5,000 which is quite high for a library designed for 6,000 undergraduate students. The building is open 24 hours for about three weeks closer to the examination period to support students' study needs. The library provides one of the venues for events and activities on a regular basis throughout the year, except for the blackout periods near exam periods. Some of the many events include the annual Patrons' day dinner graced by the President of Singapore and other dignitaries, as well as campus blood drive, Chinese New Year celebrations, workshops, seminars, conferences, book launches, various student welcome events and so on. Community activities in the library are encouraged as campus spaces for such events are limited.

SMU campus, being a city campus, has limited opportunities to expand and increase its space for more classrooms, common areas, offices and various service areas. Students appreciate all areas of the library, especially the open plan group study areas as well as the project rooms each of which can accommodate 4-6 people and has an LCD monitor for group work. The usage of the library space is consistently high throughout the academic year, except during term 3, which is May to July. It is not surprising to observe almost all study spaces being occupied even during the first few weeks of the terms. This may be partly due to the competitive nature of the Singapore education system as well as the increasingly common group and peer learning, a unique feature of SMU pedagogy right from the beginning of its establishment. SMU's central location may be another contributing factor for its popularity. Also, many Singapore homes are relatively small, often shared by other members of the extended family and may not be conducive for group work and/or quiet study. Students work very hard throughout their university education to achieve high grades and to succeed. They are diligent, articulate, outgoing, interested, polite, involved and technologically sophisticated. They are also quite forthcoming with their comments and suggestions about library space. Library staff receive every single suggestion seriously and respond in a pro-active and humorous style, making it a fun exercise which helps a great deal with student engagement and accessibility of library staff.

We have many suggestions from the students about the library space, some of which are common in most academic libraries. The comments and suggestions range from more seating, clearly marked quiet areas, food in the library, other noisy students to air conditioning and bathrooms (not enough) as well as opening hours. However, it is interesting to note that we also receive a lot of positive comments and accolades from students, sometimes once a week or more.

3. WHY MASTER PLANNING?

We decided to undertake a master planning exercise using experts in library design rather than attempt to fix different parts of the building in a piecemeal manner, even though we knew about the challenges for various spaces and facilities in the Library. We also agreed that it was important to take a holistic view of the building and spaces and to think strategically about the needs of the university as a whole and not only the current and future needs of the library. It was important to have a clear strategic direction for the future of the SMU Library spaces and not take a short term view. We were conscious about the critical importance of ‘planning big and implementing small’, in other words stage by stage implementation rather than one big renovation (Forrest and Bostick, 2013, p.143).

We could have obtained some funding to do selective renovations, such as upgrading a particular study space, replacing some furniture which we do on an on-going basis anyway or changing the location of a service desk, relocation of certain collections or refreshing of the staff office areas, as part of the annual budget cycle. In fact, we were given a sum of money to upgrade the furniture in the Collaborative Study Area on Level 2. We decided not to use the money, instead obtained special funds from the President to proceed with the master planning exercise. As Andrew Nimmo said ‘without an analytical design process new library designs risk turning into an interior decorating exercise’ (Nimmo, 2012, p.201).

There were a number of other space related campus initiatives either under consideration or in the process of implementation when we embarked on the library master planning which have synergies with each other. Some of these initiatives are:

- The new School of Law Building and the Law Library (named Madam Kwa Geok Choo Library) project – expected completion by 2016.
- Campus Green project: Campus Green is the park-like garden surrounding the library building. SMU wants to make better use of this space for student activities, as most student activities take place in the concourse within the basement due to the climate as well as availability of facilities there. .
- Responsibility Centred Accounting (RCA) and charging for use of space. The university has introduced RCA to incentivise Schools and departments/units to use the university’s resources, such as space more responsibly and to optimise use of existing space. The cost of space belonging to each School and central units has been calculated and included in School and unit budgets.

The inputs for the library space transformation project came from a number of sources, including library staff planning exercise resulting in a SWOT analysis, survey results from the SMU Students’ Association Annual satisfaction survey, focus group meetings with various student groups, a special consultancy report done by a group of students on the library as a whole, suggestions received through the library suggestion box, results of pre and post tests done for first year students and finally the LibQual library survey conducted in early 2013. The LibQual survey results which rated the library very well, were highly favourable about library staff and services. However, library space did not fare well which was not surprising considering the comments the library has been receiving from the students via other channels for some time.

The following comments made were representative about ‘Library as Place’:

The entire atmosphere at the library - feels too cramped and crowded with people for it to be a place for reflection or creativity

There isn’t enough space for quiet study

If zones for group work and individual were more clearly demarcated, students will know where the appropriate place to go

The following comments made were also representative about service and staff:

*The service has been top notch for years. The librarians go out of their way to be helpful. (Faculty)
I believe that SMU has a leading library team that understands and cares for the needs of every individual student. The library team has played an integral role in my academic pursuits thus far.
I like how the librarians are always eager to assist me whenever I approach them with questions. The library training I received in class is also very useful.*

Based on the inputs, feedback, suggestions and various reports, the objectives of the master planning exercise were drawn up over a number of months. They are to create:

- More flexible, multi-purpose and multi-use spaces in the Library and the rest of the building, e.g. Level 1 and Basement.
- More functional, effective and conducive study spaces in the Library, i.e. reflective, interactive, collaborative.
- A separate 24/7 study area with its own air conditioning.
- More prominent and welcoming entrance to the Library.
- A variety of event/function spaces.

And to:

- Increase seating and the variety of seating (individual, group, quiet, discussion space).
- Minimise/eliminate any 'dead'/unusable spaces and create more usable, innovative and vibrant spaces for a variety of study and activity uses.
- Make the most of the Campus Green, integrate the Library with the Campus Green spaces more.
- Synchronise the Li Ka Shing Library master planning activity with the Madam Kwa Geok Choo library planning.
- Combine service points in order to provide a more seamless and integrated service.
- Bring all library staff together in one area and use more space efficient and innovative office arrangement for stronger team building activities and more effective communication across teams.

4. CHALLENGES

The space challenges the library faces today are closely linked to the evolution and transformation of library spaces and services coupled with changes in pedagogy, use of library resources, scholarly communication, research practices, the growth of SMU, student demographics and technology. It was interesting to examine the original assumptions regarding the planning and design of the library space more than ten years later. The table below compares the original assumptions for the 2002 master plan and what the current state of the library is:

	Original assumptions and plan (2002)	2013 – current situation
Volumes	309,353 volumes including 16,000 current journals, 3,144 recent back runs and 124,360 bound volumes plus 7,200 CD-ROMs, 1,950 AV items	50,000 (we intend to keep the numbers low; law collection will be housed in the Law library); e-book collection : 83,000 titles e-journal collection: 72,000 titles
Seating	1,280 including 36 group rooms	1500, including 34 project rooms
Number of computers	166	45 (we intend to keep computer numbers low as all students own at least one device and prefer using their own computers; some of the computers are needed to access special finance e-resources, e.g. Bloomberg,

		Capital IQ etc.
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Many small and incremental changes have been made to the library space and facilities over the years to make it more accessible and usable so as to respond to the changing needs and requirements of increasing numbers of users since the initial building was occupied. The challenges we have identified in relation to the building are:

- Uninspiring, dated and tired look
- Students expect different kinds of spaces, facilities and services
- Increased numbers of students (undergraduates and postgraduates)
- Need for a 24/7 study area with its own separate air-conditioning control and separate entrance but adjacent to the library
- Staff distributed over four floors
- Too many service points
- Furniture- inappropriate for present day services. Most study tables have LAN connections installed originally and is never used as the entire campus is wireless.
- Entrance and way-finding confusing
- Outdated signage
- Need to bring Library entrance to Level 1
- Inefficient space use (e.g. printing rooms and storerooms on three floors with stunning views of the Campus Green) as well as large inefficient circulation spaces and corridors
- Difficult to introduce new services
- Inadequate and inappropriate spaces for events, functions, exhibitions
- Post-graduate suite is not conducive to collaborative and group work
- Learning Lab (previously Training Room) design is not aligned with SMU pedagogy and needs to be redesigned to accommodate more interactive and group learning

The main entrance of the Library on Level 2 is hidden, obscure and almost impossible to find. Most visitors use the escalators from Level 1 and the Basement to come to the Library. There is also a staircase connecting the courtyard in the Basement as well as another set of stairs from the Basement up to Level 1, but these sets of stairs are not prominent that most people are not aware of their existence and those who know about them do not use them as they are inconvenient.

5. THE JOURNEY

The SMU Campus Development Office and the Library worked together to prepare the tender documents in accordance with Singapore tender regulations from mid-2012 onwards. After much deliberation, an architectural firm was appointed to conduct the master planning exercise which included:

- a) Space programming study and concept design layout
- b) Implementation of the space programming study and concept design layout (at the University's option)

A project kick-off meeting was held in January 2013 involving the library, the architectural firm and their various consultants and SMU's Office of Campus Development.

The principal designer conducted focus group meetings with the following groups over a period of three weeks:

- a) Library staff: three different group discussions, each focusing on a different aspect of library space; Services and Student Spaces; Collection and Workflow; Staff Spaces. Some staff attended more than one session. Each session lasted for about 2 hours.
- b) Undergraduate students with the SMU Student Association representatives (3 sessions)
- c) Postgraduate students (one session)
- d) Faculty (one session)

Some of the techniques used by the design consultants to engage and involve the participants to contribute ideas to the design were:

- a) Participants were asked to think about a typical day in their lives whether working or studying at SMU prior to coming to the sessions. A day in their lives at SMU, regardless of their use of the Library, physical or virtual use of the library.
- b) They were also asked to bring an example of another similar library or community space, a building elsewhere in the world, it could be an example of a great work, exhibition, performance, relaxation or teaching space, it could be an example of a great outdoor space, in short it can be anything that inspires you in relation to thinking about this project.
- c) Metaphor cards.
- d) Strategic activity mapping, menu of settings.
- e) Playback ideas; Conceptual response; Validation (distillation and testing).

The architects used the results of these focus group sessions in addition to the information made available to them earlier in the process, to put together a concept design plan for the building. The principles underlying the new master plan or concept plan included:

- Clearly delineated creative, reflective and interactive spaces for student use
- Two kinds of post-graduate student spaces – for interactive group discussions and for individual quiet study
- Elimination of ‘dead’ and unused spaces
- Making the most of the beautiful outdoor spaces and the vistas surrounding the library
- A multi-use Learning Lab designed to encourage interactive learning with high end technology
- Environmental sensitivity and sustainability
- Bringing together service points and staff spaces
- More intuitive way finding by way of introducing ‘Student Streets’ on each level
- More prominent and distinctive entrance to the Library
- Relationship of the Library building to other buildings, facilities, roads, paths, transport, learning spaces and adjacent sites – streetscape and landscape
- Flexible spaces and increased seating
- Variety of event spaces
- A separate 24/7 study space
- Potential of new spaces to attract donors for naming rights and a donor wall
- Introducing a new concept for staff work areas – one that fosters collaboration and creativity

The plans went through several iterations after presentations to the library staff, the Library Advisory Committee and the President and the Provost. The Campus Development Group, which is a sub-committee of the Board of Trustees, was given a tour of the spaces and facilities. The project received favourable response from everyone. The next stage is refinement of the space programming and budget allocation so that the transformation exercise involving only internal construction and modification of various mechanical and electrical elements can go ahead, after permissions are obtained from various Singapore authorities. As the library occupies land in the historical district of Singapore, there are a number of building restrictions, such as building height, visual connectivity between the two museums and Campus Green, porosity (meaning the need for 40% of the building footprint at ground floor to be open public space) and the aesthetic harmony of the buildings to be in keeping with the rest of the surrounding areas.

The process of consultations and focus groups produced a number of positive outcomes for the Library and for the University. The master planning journey has been beneficial, interesting, and helpful for community building and producing opportunities for the library to demonstrate its willingness to share spaces and to create multi-purpose facilities for the entire university. Also, the journey has been helpful for staff development, staff involvement as well as review of services and

operations for more effective services. It has helped stakeholders in thinking beyond the library project in isolation and seeing it as part of a university-wide fabric and environment.

Some of the flow-on effects of the planning journey we have experienced are:

- a) Students' genuine interest and excitement in being able to contribute ideas and input to the planning of the library spaces and facilities helped contribute to the strengthening of student engagement, goodwill and collaboration. Student groups have been helpful with the dissemination of information about the various stages of the project through their own channels.
- b) The process also helped us to think about the existing use of leased spaces in the Library. A café has been operating inside the Library, immediately after the security gates since the beginning. The location of the café and its physical appearance have always been incongruous with the Library's image, services and branding.
- c) A small taskforce was formed to do a feasibility study on the 'single desk' concept aimed at combining the existing services desk on level 2 with the information desk on level 3. The study examined usage of both the desks, the nature of enquiries, staffing, staff training and operating hours as well as various dependencies, such as proximity to the special finance database computers.
- d) The review of existing collections and planning for future spaces should never be a one-off activity for a library. SMU Library is fortunate not to have large legacy print collections as we aim to have small print and large electronic collections. However, print collections keep growing and need to be reviewed on an on-going basis. We have now reduced our expenditure on print collections considerably and started reducing some of the old print journal volumes. Collection usage analysis along with reorganisation of collections and reallocation of collection budgets are essential activities to prepare the library for the future.

6. WAY FORWARD AND CONCLUSION

As with any library refurbishment and repurposing, timing and staging along with cash flow and funding are the most critical elements. Closing the Library will not be an option when the renovation journey begins. The new Law Library which would have provided some additional options will not be ready, probably until August 2016. The decisions involving which aspects of the existing building can be refurbished will depend on the service priorities, timing, the length of time required for particular areas to be unavailable and budget.

What has been exciting and motivating so far is the journey itself. The lifecycle of libraries is getting shorter, the cost of repurposing is getting higher and the demand for more flexible, attractive, interactive and multi-purpose learning spaces on campuses is growing. The library buildings built ten or more years ago are no longer sufficient, even if some renovation takes place from time to time. It is important to sit back and take a holistic approach to the whole building rather than fix parts of a building in isolation. The parent institution, the faculty, the students, the academic programmes, the pedagogy, technology, people's interaction with spaces, commercial, private and public spaces, such as shopping malls, cafes, supermarkets where our users spend time are all evolving. Students' expectations about library spaces are influenced by their exposure to non-university spaces, such as cafes, malls, social gathering places and by social media. They are critical aspects of the learning journey and campus experience. Nowhere else are students able to access the spaces, facilities, expert help and the resources over long periods of time. Nowhere else can they meet other students for social interaction and for study purposes and feel that the space is theirs and they can feel ownership throughout their university experience. As Fintan O'Toole said "*The library is a place that has no agenda other than allowing people to invent their own agendas*" (in Dempsey, 2005).

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