The **SCONUL** Library Design Award 2007 – how it was for me

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Introduction

What follows is a description of the part of my summer spent participating in the SCONUL Library Design Award process. To remind everyone, the award is made, in the words of the call for submissions, 'in recognition of newly designed spaces which function effectively in meeting the needs of users and library staff, and which also meet the demanding requirements of a modern learning and research environment. The award identifies and celebrates examples of best practice in the period 2000–2005.'

The SCONUL Working Group on Space Planning administered the award process and made the recommendation to the SCONUL Executive Board. No member of the judging panel was involved in the judging or consideration of their own library.

The following criteria were considered:

- overall design and fit to organisational mission
- adaptability and flexibility
- accessibility, legibility and intuitive design
- choice in learning and research spaces
- ambience
- environmental issues and sustainability
- safety and security for people, collections and equipment
- efficiency and sustainability in space, staffing, running and maintenance costs
- innovation in service and design
- design impact.

At the time of writing (November 2007) the results remain confidential so the identities of the libraries visited will be protected, and parts of this article will of necessity appear vague: however it is hoped that what remains is of some interest to the SCONUL membership at large.

BEFORE THE AWARD VISITS

The prelude to the award visits consisted of an agreement by the SCONUL Working Group on Space, of which I am a member, as to how the award process was going to work, followed by an announcement from SCONUL inviting libraries to submit themselves for the award. Eighteen libraries submitted and they were all visited, as the working group felt that it was necessary to see them in order to appreciate them fully. The working group then agreed on how we were going to do this, which was basically through visits in groups of three, in all cases except one, and we agreed the criteria by which the libraries would be judged. There would be a mix-and-match approach to the composition of the visiting panels, which was intended to ensure consistency of approach. The SCONUL office sorted out the visit arrangements and the logistics.

THE AWARD VISITS

The visits followed the same pattern as far as possible, and each usually lasted about two and a half hours. Staff at the host library talked to the panel members about the library's design, and showed them round. The panel then met to discuss the outcomes of the visit, after which the host staff were available for further discussion as required. Outcomes were firmed up by e-mails between panel members later.

My participation in the visits covered a total of eight days over a period of just over three weeks, from late July until mid-August, during which I was on panels visiting nine libraries. I travelled to four countries, stayed in five hotels and had two plane journeys and more train journeys than I can count. All the travelling went to plan, although I had a near-miss and would have been stranded in Nottingham on returning across country to Lincolnshire, had the last train of the day not waited for an incoming very late train – not good for the nerves.

It all started after the weekend of the floods, and for about twenty-four hours over the weekend the train route that I was to take to reach my first destination was suspended. So I spent a few hours thinking I was not going to get there and wondering what that would mean for the schedule. It all worked out right in the end and the train journey was uneventful, except for the return journey mentioned above, which could have happened at any time.

The first trip was for a day and a half (half a day to get there and then do the visit and return). The next week saw another day and a half with half a day to get there, two libraries visited and then the return journey. That return journey was on the last train of the day but that too, although long, went to plan. Over the middle of the next week I did 'the big one', when I visited three libraries in three days in three different locations requiring a plane journey from Doncaster (my nearest airport) to Ireland, a plane journey from Ireland to elsewhere in England, and a train journey across England to get to the third library, after which there was another long journey back.

My final visit in the fourth week was on a more modest scale – just a train into London and outward to the destination and a similar journey in reverse the next day, with a car journey between the two places visited courtesy of a fellow panel member.

AFTER THE AWARD VISITS

Once I had completed my contribution, other visits went on for another few weeks. The visit outcomes were collated and the working group agreed the results at a meeting in September. The results were to be announced at the SCONUL meeting in December 2007.

WHAT IT MEANT FOR ME

I met some very interesting people, and saw some wonderful libraries, needless to say. I believe I saw one from the air before the usual approach from the ground. My fellow panel members provided good company and made it a very enjoyable experience. I knew them all through SCONUL working group meetings, some of them for several years. Spending time with them either through travelling with them or dining with them or staying at the same hotels was an opportunity to learn fascinating things that I would never otherwise have known, such as one's offspring's sporting prowess (national standard), and another's connections with the crime novelist Ian Rankin (cause for some envy).

I have been able to provide generic (anonymous) feedback to my colleagues with whom I work, which I hope will be of benefit as part of our internal planning processes.

Among the features we noted during the visits were the following:

- the growth in electronic resources as a strategy to reduce the need for physical collections, thereby creating more learning spaces
- the move of significant proportions of physical collections to off-site stores, also creating more learning spaces
- the growth of flexible learning environments
- the use of space to support researchers
- less innovation in staff space than in user space.

All of these factors are relevant to the University of Lincoln experience, either as offering possible solutions to the space pressures in the university library or as factors to consider when planning our library extension, Phase 2.

I feel uniquely privileged in having been given the opportunity to participate in the Library Design Awards of both 2002 and 2007 (more by historical accident than by deliberate plan). I travelled through some fabulous scenery, and visited some places I'd never been to before. I am grateful to SCONUL for giving me this opportunity.

I also moved house and changed part of my job role whilst all this was going on. I had quite a summer!

Thanks to Sheila Cannell, Chair of the SCONUL Working Group on Space, for her helpful comments on this article.