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**Seeing clearly – the redevelopment of the Central Library, Imperial College London: a review of the extension and refurbishment of the Central Library, South Kensington campus, from concept to completion and beyond**

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Opportunity is not a lengthy visitor. When a series of disparate factors became aligned in late 2005, the chance to redevelop level one of the Central Library was seized by the then Director of Library Services, Clare Jenkins.

**INFLUENCING FACTORS**

Over the past five years a number of department libraries had come into the building, maximising stock access but eroding study spaces and flexibility as collections grew.

Some influences were of our own design – a radical review of print collections against secure electronic alternatives allowed the library to

rigorously realign journal collections to electronic delivery.

Most crucial were timely external factors – the closure of a bookshop occupying a corner of the library building and the removal of a large part of the Science Museum Library’s older collections (almost 50% of level one was used for storage).

Underpinning all these influences was a strong desire to redefine library services for a twenty-first-century student, resident in an international institution. That the library should reflect user needs was a given. Evidence was gathered via student feedback, a postcard survey and of course benchmarking against the library sector generally.

The postcard survey was exactly as it sounds – a quick question survey focusing on student workspace preferences and habits, distributed on specially designed postcards using the tagline ‘The Central Library is changing – and so are you.’

The results indicated that 25% of users wanted to work in either a designated group space or somewhere that had a social buzz as a background. The majority of users work with a range of print and electronic resources at the same time. When asked to suggest one change or improvement, increased access to PCs was the number-one request.

#### **DESIGNS ON CHANGE**

Our remit was:

- to reflect the changing work patterns of students and support their broader learning styles
- to offer flexibility and adaptability of space to meet current and future demands on the library building
- to respond to the expectations of students and staff in an ambitious, demanding university.

Beneath these drivers was a much longer shopping list, including a learning café with a range of PC options, innovative and inspiring study areas for group and individual work, teaching and training rooms, interrelated service desk and staff space and the elusive ‘wow’ factor – level one would be our shop window; it had to mirror all our aspirations.

The design timeline for the actual library space was incredibly short for such an ambitious project. A small library design team met on a weekly basis

with the architects (A-EM) between October and December 2006 to work on the floor plan and concepts for the different types of space.

That the design had to incorporate certain fixed structural features – the main stairs, lifts and internal supporting walls – made the challenge all the greater.

The following year and a half saw level one disappear under a shroud of hoardings (or a hoard of shroudings!) and library services were delivered via a temporary location from the upper floors.

#### **SEEING THE IMPACT**

Level one opened in July 2008 and its success was transparent, translucent and clear. The innovative design uses a range of materials to divide and define space, creating a range of enclosed and open spaces which define use and purpose.

The group-study area offers a range of options from flexible open space with movable furniture to more defined work spaces called ‘think tanks’ and ‘c screens’.



The café is of course a study space too, though kept discrete as it can only be entered from before the library entry gates. Seating has been created to encourage both individual and collaborative PC use, as well as comfortable low seating for social



and chill-out time. College catering provides a staffed service between 08.30 and 23.00 during the week, though the space remains open for 24 hours with vending provision.

The individual study and training area has a different feeling. Muted blue walls and solid wood desks create a quieter environment. Three student-bookable rooms are also available for presentation practice and group work.

The staff- and service-focused zones were the most difficult to design: the configuration, interrelationships and travel routes through the building challenged everyone involved. That self-issue usage has increased (from 50% to 70% of all loans) by the clever positioning of our machines and that we have been able to make the coretext collection walk-in access are both indicators of success.



The floor has been enhanced by the generous donation of over 50 canvases by artist Bob Brighton. The bold colour themes challenge the eye and complete what is very much a visual space.

We have relied on college expertise to help support the promotion of the completed project. The online video tour remains the most watched videoclip on the college website. A direct link is available from [www.imperial.ac.uk/library](http://www.imperial.ac.uk/library).

#### **AN EYE ON THE FUTURE**

Instinct and seeing the space in use tell us that the design is successful. Gate entries, circulation and head counts all confirm that we are a third busier than a year ago. For more formal evidence we have committed to monitoring and reflecting on the design throughout this academic year, considering both its impact on the library and our ambitions for library space in the future. In November last year a follow-up survey was conducted,

reviewing the student to study spaces ratio across all floors of the library. At the time of writing we are about to embark on holding a number of focus groups, with the student response to the group-study areas being key.

We have refurbished one floor of a five-storey building. The completed refurbishment continues to send ripples of change through the library service. What we do next may be curtailed by the financial climate, but certainly not by aspiration and ambition.

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