

Designing Successful Libraries

Libraries have for hundreds of years been considered the centre of learning with shelves of beautifully bound books, periodicals and journals. In recent times however library design has shifted to reflect 21st century life. The traditional library with rows of book stacks and silent reading rooms has given way to a landscape of different spaces to facilitate a wider range of activities. In an increasingly digital age libraries also act as places to bring communities together, reducing isolation and improving well-being. Below, we look at some of key design considerations for creating well-designed library spaces.

Silence!?

Libraries are no longer seen as just spaces for silent reading. A variety of spaces from silent, quiet and solitary to collaborative and noisy may need to be provided. Libraries are also now expected to accommodate a huge range of activities. We work with key stakeholders to understand how the library will be used and by whom to build up a brief and formulate a space strategy. Interior design; colour, finishes and furniture styles can be used to clearly demarcate areas for different activities. Flexible spaces can be created to be easily reconfigured to suit different uses at different times.

Books or not books?

The future of books has been challenged in the digital age. Having worked with a range of education and local authority clients however, we believe that books are likely to remain a vital part of the Library offering. ArchitecturePLB has helped clients explore options to condense their book collections to free up space for a greater variety of spaces.

Our briefing study for the new Library at London South Bank University included an automated, high-rack storage and retrieval system. Like an Amazon warehouse, we proposed a giant vitrine within the core of the Library, housing the books and the robotic storage system. This releases about 80% of the floor space of a conventional library for other activities such as study or community space.

Some are going further, for instance London Metropolitan University is looking at cutting non-essential books to a minimum, keeping special collections and creating a dispersed 'learning commons' model, supported by online resources.

Wellbeing; Restorative Spaces

In order for users to fully benefit from the services on offer, libraries need to be pleasant and welcoming places to spend time. Somewhere to get a good cup of coffee will attract users but bright, well designed spaces with good daylight and acoustics will help retain them long term. Following the principles of building design standards such as 'Well', and 'Wellbriefing' can assist in developing buildings that contribute to the wellbeing of the users. Considerations include:

Indoor air quality: Good ventilation (and therefore low concentrations of CO²) benefit health and productivity.

Thermal comfort, daylighting and lighting: Comfort factors such as these are crucial for occupant satisfaction, though every user is different. Our approach is to give occupants the chance to choose from a landscape of varied spaces. Views and bright sunshine will be important to some; cosy, lower light spaces will be sought by others. A successful library building will provide a wide variety of space.

Look and Feel: Materials and colours should be selected to create uplifting internal spaces. Scientific understanding of the positive impact of views to green space and natural forms on (particularly) mental health is growing. Colour schemes, shapes and textures that link back to the natural world can be beneficial to wellbeing.



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01 The phased library refurbishment for the London School of Economics includes a variety of spaces. Laser cut acoustic panels inspired by natural forms provide dappled light for quiet study spaces

02 For the Royal Veterinary College, we created a semi-enclosed 'pod' for collaborative work within an underused courtyard which sits alongside the more traditional library

03 Coloured glass creates a vibrant interior for Pimlico Community Library

04 ArchitecturePLB has designed two distinct spaces for Kensington Prep School, one a fully digitally enabled vibrant 'explore floor' and the other a more traditional library, a mature, calming, IT free environment to engage with books

Photography:
01 Gavin Stewart
02 Timothy Soar
03 Timothy Soar
04 Kensington Prep School

Specialist Collections

With reference material and more standard publications available on line, there has been a greater focus on specialist collections, which have unique requirements and design considerations. For example, the need for access to and display of historic artefacts needs to be balanced with the requirement for controlled environmental conditions.

ArchitecturePLB worked with the London School of Economics and Political Science to create a new home for the Women's Library which holds the oldest and most extensive collection of women's history in Europe. We designed the Reading Room in consultation with the LSE Library team, learning from the best practice at institutions such as the National Archives at Kew. The Reading Room incorporates display cases to allow exhibition of artefacts and interpretative information about the historic collections.

The Reading Room is supported by a secure, climate-controlled archive store, also designed by ArchitecturePLB, as part of an earlier phase of work involving refurbishment of a number of aspects of the Library. A publicly accessible exhibition space located at the library entrance facilitates larger exhibitions.

Whilst designing a range of projects for the Royal Veterinary College (RVC), we worked with curators to create ways of interpreting the story of the institution through artefacts from their two designated collections. At the purpose built Teaching and Research Centre display units were designed into circulation and break out spaces. Display cases also line the walls of the Lightwell Cafe at the College's Camden Campus.

Library logistics & the process of developing the design

The first task for any project is the initial space planning to define the main area requirements benchmarked against other facilities or derived from first principles.

Once the high-level space requirement is established, a full design team will be required to consider the specific technical requirements that come with library design. These include; long-term flexibility, structural loading, specialist IT, controlled environments for specialist collections and specialist acoustics.

Phasing and Occupied sites:

On constrained sites, where decant is not possible, we have developed phasing strategies where the majority of the library facility can be maintained in constant use. This approach comes with other benefits, allowing each incremental step to be tested through end-user feedback and POE (Post Occupancy Evaluation) to demonstrate value and fine tune a programme of works for the next phase. The impact is felt by the user community as soon as each stage completes and the risks of single stage major investments in an uncertain world can be avoided. We can use our skill and experience to recommend the most effective approach to a phased project, maximising benefits whilst minimising disruption.

Incremental projects need to be structured to ensure that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. This attention to meaningful benefits for the client, can also be applied to major new build library projects. The changes seen in library facilities over the last 10-15 years will no doubt continue and we can design in the potential for change and flexible, creating agile and adaptable buildings.

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05 Display cases in the Lightwell Cafe showcase RVC's special collections

06 ArchitecturePLB has delivered a range of projects within the LSE Lionel Robbins Building as part of a phased programme

07 Ground floor exhibition space at LSE's Library makes special collections easily accessible to the public

Photography:
05 Timothy Soar
06 Nigel Stead / LSE
07 Nigel Stead / LSE



More information about some of the projects featured here can be found on our website: www.architectureplb.com

[Kensington Prep School](#)

[Pimlico Academy and Community Library](#)

[Royal Veterinary College](#)

[London School of Economics](#)

[Barking and Dagenham Library](#)

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