

Refurbishing, Extending, Recreating, and Renewing the Boole Library at University College Cork, Ireland

Seamus McMahon

Seamus McMahon is Deputy Librarian at University College Cork, Ireland; he has been the Internal Library Project Manager for the Recently Completed New Postgraduate Research Library at Cork, s.mcmahon@ucc.ie

The article below is based on a presentation given by Seamus McMahon on Wednesday 9 April 2008 at the LIBER architecture group seminar in Budapest; a powerpoint presentation with photographs of the library is available from http://www.zhbluzern.ch/LIBER-LAG/PP_LAG_08/Wednesday/McMahon_Refurbishing-def.pdf.

Abstract

This paper reports on the new Postgraduate Research Library Project at Cork using it as a case study to consider the building and design issues which arise from a re-configuration and extension of an existing building. It will also reflect on the experience of working with joint architects from different continents; SBRA of Boston, USA, and Wilson Architecture of Cork, Ireland. It reports on the key objectives and features of the new spaces including the various consultation and decision-making processes with the Design Team, library staff, and other stakeholders during the project. It concludes with a consideration of lessons learnt.

Key Words: Buildings; Refurbishment; Extensions; Academic Libraries

The New Postgraduate Research Library at University College Cork (UCC) was officially opened in January of 2008. It takes the form of a 6,000m. sq extension added to an existing 10,000m. sq building which dates from the early 1980s. The original building was reconfigured and refurbished as part of the project. The project was funded through a combination government sponsored funding to support research, and private sector philanthropy. With the completion of the project the available library space in the UCC library system is 18,000m. sq serving 20,000 registered clients. The total number of reader places is 2,920.

Project Goals

1. To create more library space to accommodate an expanded student population as well as a significant growth in printed collections. There was some catching up to do in terms of building up infrastructure.
2. To provide a high level IT infrastructure which would maximise the provision and availability of electronic information sources and services including multi-media. While the old building was modular in design, the installation of new IT was hampered by an absence of flexibility when it came to services.
3. To provide secure environmentally controlled accommodation for the storage and consultation of the library's special collections and archives, and to improve access to these collections. This would enable the library to house its special collections in appropriate conditions while at the same time improving access through the creation of state-of-the-art reading rooms. The implementation of this objective included the installation of a gas based fire suppression system, and an assessment of possible damage from water.
4. In recognition of the fact that the use of the physical spaces in libraries by students is becoming more and more optional because of remote access and mobile technologies, a decision was taken to create social and group study spaces within the library for the purposes of collaborative learning. Teaching rooms to support information literacy were created.

Key Dates

Key dates in the project were as follows:

- 2003 approval and feasibility
- 2004 schematic design and planning
- June 2005 construction commences
- June 2007 refurbishment commences
- October 2007 completion
- January 2008 official opening

Materials

The materials used in the facades were natural sandstone, pre-oxidised copper cladding, and glass. The use of sandstone is indigenous to Cork, appearing in many public buildings. The sandstone does not increase the visual mass of the existing building but contrasts with it.

Ventilation

The old Boole Library dating from the 1980s, which was a deep building with a mechanical ventilation system, had a history of poor ventilation. The new building project offered an opportunity to remedy the deficiencies of the old building. A new atrium at the junction of the new building and the old provides light and ventilation. As a general principle spaces for staff and students are located close to sources of natural light.

Communication

A feature of the management of the project was the close consultation with stakeholders at all stages of the project. Regular briefings were given to staff on the progress of the project. Staff in individual sections were invited to input into the design of their office areas. In this way staff became direct players in

the change process itself. A series of meetings was arranged with the architect, project manager and the library management to go through the details of the planning as part of an intensive detailed design phase with all user groups. Another feature of the communication was the library management's attendance at meetings of the design team which comprised the architect, project manager, engineers and quantity surveyors. Extensive use was made of a range of communication media including the library web pages, e-mail, oral presentations and briefings to keep the stakeholders of staff and students updated. Notice boards around the college displayed floor plans and updates on the project. Another facet of communication was the use of internal library business meetings at which the building project was a standing item. A special building project liaison group was established which met at two-week intervals during the course of the project. This comprised library staff drawn from different divisions and sections, academic staff, the building contractor, the architect and the internal project manager. This group provided for the regular consultation with stakeholders. It gave student representatives a direct line into decision-making processes. This group provided a forum for disseminating information early and quickly. It pre-empted complaints about disruption of service, and assisted in managing the continuity of services during the project. Among the challenges faced was noise disruption due to blasting. The special collections and archives service moved to a new location two kilometres away for the duration of the project.

Refurbishment

The original project specification involved the building of new spaces combined with the selective refurbishment of parts of the old building as part of a total reconfiguration of services. Staff accommodation and service points were relocated close to the atrium which provides ventilation and natural light. The opportunity for a refurbishment of all spaces came at the end of the project when the new building began to show up the deficiencies of the old. At the end of the project all of the library's staff and materials had been moved while continuity of service had been maintained.

Issues

Some of the issues which arose during the project requiring consultation were as follows:

1. It was decided to hardwire each new reader place for data as well as power although it was also planned to have a wireless network throughout the building. The hard wiring was done as a form of future proofing at only marginal additional cost to the cost of hard-wiring for power only.
2. It was decided to locate the subject librarians throughout the building so as to be close to the collections for which they have responsibility and close to the users. It was decided to allocate private offices to subject librarians to allow for privacy and to provide a location for meetings with staff.
3. There was a small overall reduction in the number of staffed service points in the building although this was resisted at the time by some staff.
4. It was decided to increase the amount of space in the building devoted to the storage of books and periodicals by only a modest amount given the growth in electronic access. All the spaces were planned in a flexible way, often using raised floors, to allow for an easy and non-costly change of use in the future.
5. Technical services were relocated from the ground floor to a new block in the new building. There were reports of other libraries at the time of outsourcing and relocating technical services off campus.
6. Library administration was retained on the ground floor of the library so as to continue to be accessible to users.
7. Based on reports of demand for group study rooms in other new libraries, thirteen new group study rooms were included in the specification for the new building. The library proceeded with this initiative although there had been little expressed interest from academic staff at the time. Since the opening of the new library there has been a big uptake on the use of these rooms for collaborative learning.

Flexible IT Infrastructure

In anticipation of the new world of mobile technologies, an early decision was taken not to flood the new building with desktop PCs. This is apparent at the entrance to the new building where there are open bright spaces with a range of furniture configurations including large formal tables and individual casual seating. The intention was to create an ambience which was welcoming, conducive to study and research, while at the same time providing social spaces for collaborative work. The building project was also used as a platform to install new self-service technologies including proximity access, more self-issue machines, an RFID open reserve and a mechanical book sorter. The mechanical book sorter was included late in the project and necessitated the construction of a new room. The book sorter has reduced the amount of manual handling carried out by staff. It has expedited the return of books to the shelves and allows for users to return books after the staffed service points have closed. A multi-media area was created through an upgrade of the existing AV area within the library; this was done by putting in data points and by installing new high-end equipment. Digital signage is throughout the building; this has already proven to be useful in communicating out to the users information at short notice.

Architects

The architects to the project were SBRA of Boston and Wilson Architecture of Cork. SBRA have large experience and a track record in designing libraries. The architects were able to speak the same specialist librarian language as the library staff. This facilitated explaining and articulating the functional requirements of the library. Wilson Architecture contributed hugely to the project with national and local expertise. They performed the role of project managers. Our experience of working with architects on both sides of the Atlantic was that face-to-face continued to be vital at key phases of the project including conceptual design. Video conferencing was less useful for sensitive or detailed discussion. At the beginning of the project there were a number of study tours to the UK and to the USA which contributed to team work between all members of the design team. Visits to other libraries provided invaluable in learning about new design developments and managing building projects.

Working Relationships

The need to put together a statement of requirements to give to the architect, necessitated a dialogue between library staff about the services we provide and the functional spaces needed to provide those services. This process needed to come to a definitive agreed conclusion within a short timeframe.

Private sector deadlines were a novelty for us along with the requirement that staff were asked to sign off on plans as agreed. The signing-off process gave staff a sense of empowerment and also improved accountability.

Lessons Learnt

1. The importance of consulting with stakeholders (staff and students) on the objectives of the project and throughout the project cannot be overstated.
2. The project is more than just the creation of new space; it is an opportunity to deliver new services to students and to do things in a new way.
3. Attention to detail is important. The new spaces that were the most thought out gave the best results.
4. Always keep an eye towards the future by insisting on flexible spaces.
5. Do not take anything for granted. Follow your professional instincts and keep asking questions.

Websites Referred to in the Text

Library University College Cork, <http://booleweb.ucc.ie/>

Wilson Architecture Cork, www.wilsonarchitecture.ie

SBRA Architects, www.sbra.com