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# The David Wilson Library, University of Leicester

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The extension and remodeling of the David Wilson Library at the University of Leicester was completed in April 2008 and received the SCONUL Building Award in 2010.

The first purpose-built main University Library at Leicester, designed by Castle Park Dean Hook, was completed in 1974 and occupied a central campus site between two listed buildings. Award-winning and innovative in its time, it delivered 800 traditional study spaces over five storeys. By 2002 the student population had almost quadrupled to 19 000 and the building was under serious strain. The introduction of compact shelving and the construction of a remote bookstore had not resolved pressure on space, and opportunities for service enhancement were severely constrained by the physical limitations of the building. In essence, the building was not fit to meet the expectations placed on an academic library service in the twenty-first century.

The university decided that the library would form the centrepiece in its 2002 development plan for the estate. Following extensive consultations, the decision was made to design the largest building possible on the restricted site, extending to the rear and front and remodeling the 1970s structure to a high standard in order to create a seamless building of 15 600 square metres, about twice the size of the original. In all, £35m was invested in the three-year development project led by Faithful & Gould (project managers) and including Associated Architects and Faber Maunsell (engineers).

In its enlarged space, the David Wilson Library project provides

- 1500 study spaces, including a 200-place postgraduate suite; 13 group study rooms;

350 places with PCs; formal and informal seating

- access to wireless throughout, two IT training rooms and a seminar room
- express zone for high-demand texts and collection of open access reservations
- 38 km shelving
- BS5454 special collections suite
- office accommodation for 80 staff in open plan, shared and single offices
- bookshop and café
- 500-seat lecture theatre and three adjoining seminar rooms
- Student Learning Support, the Careers Service and AccessAbility Service



*The David Wilson Library*

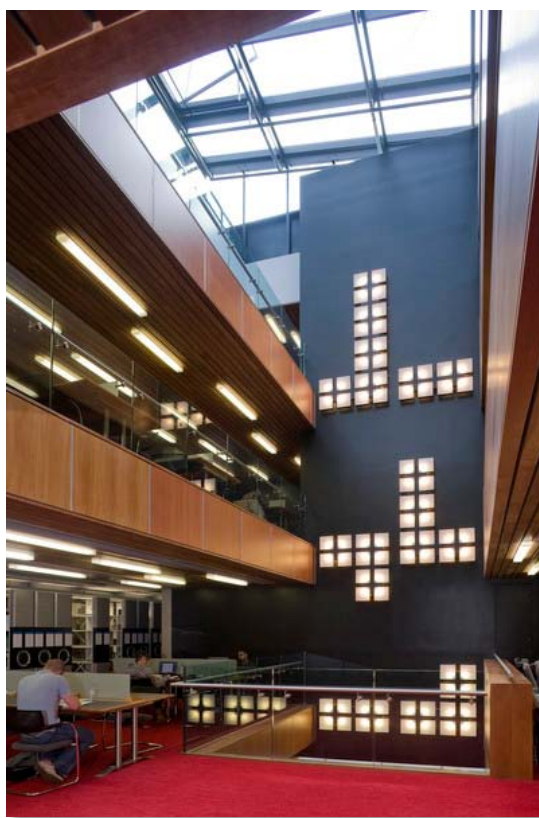
The building achieved an environmental BREEAM Excellent rating for its reuse of the concrete shell, sustainable construction methods, use of sustainable materials, high-efficiency lighting, natural ventilation and recycling of demolition material and waste.

#### **STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT**

A concerted and comprehensive communications strategy ensured that stakeholders were engaged with the design of the building and the ongoing project through a variety of mechanisms; the university Project Implementation Team, chaired by a pro-vice-chancellor, included academic staff, students and library staff; two web-based surveys identified needs and preferences; a website was created along with information boards; presentations and focus groups were held with all faculties, student-staff committees, the Students' Union Council, the University Senate and the University Council. Library staff considered the project at their section meetings and at library-wide presentations and discussion groups. Library users had the opportunity to try out and comment on the proposed furniture. Throughout, Associated Architects worked closely and productively with library staff and users.

A number of key user requirements emerged consistently from this intensive engagement and were distilled into a set of principles that guided the development of the design. Our users and staff asked us to

- maximise natural light (a response to the gloom of the existing building)
- design a building that is welcoming, safe, convenient to use, a pleasure to be in for long periods of time and recognisable as a library
- create a contemporary and sophisticated ambience with 'a sense of place'
- introduce vistas and visual interest – and also a feel of intimacy
- encourage positive behaviour by design
- ensure a clear and coherent arrangement of resources, facilities and services
- provide a flexible range of study environments, including facilities for groups and discrete study space for postgraduate students
- maximise the number of books on open access and provide more computers
- improve accessibility for users with disabilities
- build the most sustainable building possible



*Inside the David Wilson Library*

## HOW THE SPACE WORKS FOR ITS USERS

Comments from students:

*Clean lines, functional, modern... if I was to sum it up I would say that it was 'everything you need in a library'.*

*The new library has taken studying to a new level,*

From the day of opening in April 2008, the building elicited an overwhelmingly positive and often emotional response from students and staff alike. The number of visits to the building was immediately double that of the last year in the original building and both visits and loans have increased year-on-year in real terms. A post-occupation survey, structured round the guiding principles, produced extremely high ratings. In the 2009 National Student Survey, 91% of student respondents were content with the library, compared with 81% in 2008; this high rating has continued in subsequent years.



*Natural light in the atrium*

As we had hoped, students use the new services and facilities intensively and with minimum guidance required from staff. It was very important to our users and to the staff who assist them that the building be legible and easy to use. The layout and repetitive arrangement of core facilities such as study places, photocopying/scanning,

PCs, group study rooms and toilets help users to master a large building rapidly and use it with confidence. The zoning of space is understood and generally observed by students. Since the building opened, the zoning has been adjusted at students' request to create more silent space (including a silent PC zone) and more space for noisy group work. These demands neatly demonstrate the spectrum of student behaviour and expectations and highlight the importance of being able to manage the use of space flexibly and in a way that is responsive to shifting needs.

It is a building in which users evidently feel comfortable and welcome but which also maintains the gravitas and distinctive academic purpose of a library. Using the library has become a special experience for students, one that lies at the heart of what it is to be a student.

The 13 (now 14) group study rooms were fully booked from the outset, and it is evident that double that number would be used if we had the space available.

Our usage statistics show that taught postgraduate students make most use of the physical library by a significant margin, with the highest users (in the College of Arts, Humanities and Law) averaging 224 visits in 2011–12. It is therefore unsurprising that the single most successful element of the project has been the introduction of dedicated space for postgraduate students, providing a range of study spaces, group study rooms and access to PCs. A facilitator (originally funded with 'Roberts money', funding provided via the UK research councils to support the development of training opportunities for early career researchers in all subjects) is on hand in the Graduate School reading room to assist students. Also in this area is an interactive facilitated space in which postgraduate students can experiment with and receive training on new technologies. This area is so heavily used that plans are under way to designate a second area as a dedicated space for research postgraduates.

What has surprised us is that science and engineering undergraduates visit the library more often than any other undergraduate group and science and engineering taught postgraduate students clock up almost as many visits as their arts, humanities and law counterparts. This is especially gratifying as the university science community was originally skeptical about the value of investing in the library.

The 350 study spaces equipped with PCs are the most popular such areas on the campus and students will wait for a space to be available in the library rather than use a free workstation in a building that is only metres away. Whilst there are signs of a decline in students' use of fixed PCs overall (at last!) and a marked increase in the use of the wireless network, demand for the library student PCs remains as high as ever. Nevertheless, we are beginning to plan on the basis that dedicated PC study places will be reduced as more students use their own or short-loan mobile devices.

Indeed, the key challenge is managing the high use of the building and ensuring that users continue to have an excellent experience. Overcrowding (or the perception of overcrowding) is becoming a factor across most of the year and we are working to manage this within the library and also to export what seems to be a winning formula to other university buildings where learning spaces could be created. There are plans to create additional study spaces by relocating office areas. On current patterns of use this space will be designated for silent study, as this is where the greatest demand lies. For the medium and longer term we are also looking hard at the potential for significant reductions in physical stock in selected areas as e-book availability expands.

Overall, the qualitative and quantitative evidence collected over the last four years indicates that the capital investment in the library building has met the original objectives of the project. Just as importantly, the project has also delivered wider and less tangible benefits in terms of bolstering the university's sense of pride in itself.