

# The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University

## Location

Old Castle Street, Whitechapel, London

## Brief project description

To create a new building for the Library and its collections, comprising space for a reading room, archives, exhibitions, education facilities, and seminars.

## Cost of project

£6.9 million including a Heritage Lottery Fund grant of £4.2 million. The London borough of Tower Hamlets donated the land.

## Participants

Client, London Guildhall University (now London Metropolitan University); Architects, Wright & Wright; Funders, Heritage Lottery Fund and other donors including Bridgehouse Estates, the Clore Duffield Foundation, HEFCE, and the London Development Agency.

The education staff comprise a part-time access & interpretation manager and part-time assistant. Because of the nature of the collections, the majority of education groups are of Secondary school age or adults, with a minority of Primary-age groups.

## Timescale for the project

In 1995 Maureen Castens, then the University's Head of Academic Services, and Deian Hopkin, Vice Provost, started planning a new building for the Fawcett Library and archives. Wright & Wright Architects were appointed. Two years later an application was made to the Heritage Lottery Fund, which awarded a grant in 1988. Antonia Byatt was appointed the first director of the Women's Library in 2000 and the new building opened in February 2002.

## Space location & dimensions

Situated in Whitechapel on the site of a Victorian wash house and laundry, the Library occupies 2,000 square metres. The Activities Room is 30m<sup>2</sup>; the Clore Mezzanine is a multi-function space on top of the Clore Seminar Room, both of which measure 70m<sup>2</sup>.

## Background to the project

The Women's Library – formerly the Fawcett Library and its archives – holds the UK's most extensive collections of women's history, comprising books and pamphlets, journals and magazines, personal papers, records of societies and associations, plus photographs, posters, banners, and other visual materials. However, in 1995 the Fawcett, owned and run by the (then) London Guildhall University, was inadequately housed in a cramped basement with limited access and prone to flooding.

This project started as one woman's idea for a new home, and a new role, for the Fawcett Library. Maureen Castens explains: 'The University had this very valuable collection in a very unsatisfactory environment. But it wasn't something that just belonged to the University. It was part of the national heritage, and should be in a building to which everyone could come – not just academics.'

The idea was to create a building that combined library, museum and cultural centre, containing a reading room, archives, exhibition hall, education spaces, conference facilities and a café. It would also be a resource for Tower Hamlets' local communities.

## The development process

Architects Wright & Wright were appointed early, with the detailed brief still to be agreed. This squared with the architects' principle of putting time and money into getting the brief right. The client/architect relationship thereby became a more organic process, and paid dividends: for example, architect Clare Wright realised the importance of the Library being on a separate site rather than located within an existing University building.

Client and architect believed that the new building should make a positive and sensitive contribution to its urban surroundings and to local regeneration; provide secure and environmentally appropriate storage for the collections; and be physically accessible and as sustainable as possible. They also agreed that education had to be central to the Library – a significant statement of intent given the paucity of dedicated education spaces in libraries and archives.

A University briefing committee comprised mainly librarians; there was no direct educational, archival, curatorial or development input until later. Clare Wright therefore took responsibility for researching and establishing educational space requirements, visiting other sites such as the Dulwich Picture Gallery and the Geffrye Museum. She explains: 'I was the only one on the team with children and so knew about school visits and the impact of 30 children at a venue and their need for lunch space.'

At first the University did not fully appreciate the project's potential and the building's 'footprint' was reduced. Eventually, however, there was a commitment to the need for 'a high-quality, high-prestige space'.

Staff appointed before the building's completion, such as Director Antonia Byatt, brought a more specialist and hard-nosed approach to thinking about location and flexibility of spaces. For example, exhibition space was added to the reception area to encourage in passers-by. A space-eating, ground-floor shop was deemed too risky and abandoned. Staff meeting rooms were changed into office space to cope with the proposed increase in staff. The architects' design ensured flexibility in opening and closing-off different parts of the building to reduce the need for security staffing for events.

## The outcome

The finished building delivers all the spaces required over five floors, with education and exhibition spaces on the ground and mezzanine floors; café and toilets on the first; reading room on the second; and offices and archives sharing the next two floors. The basement houses more archives, plus toilets, cloakroom and lockers. The structure is a reinforced concrete frame clad inside and out with brick and set behind the façade of the original Victorian wash house. Other materials used are stone, oak, steel and glass. To meet strict environmental standards for archives, the building is passively controlled rather than air-conditioned: this reduces heating costs and environmental damage by 80% compared to conventional buildings – a first for the City of London and an HLF exemplar.

## Features:

- The importance of seeing learning and access as central to the role of a library and archive
- The challenge of combining group activity and individual research in one building
- The value of an architect who understands the need for educational provision and is prepared to research best practice
- The value of a strong client/architect relationship
- The challenge of a limited site
- The limits of flexibility and multi-use



The most important lesson is that organisations change, both in terms of the activities they engage in and of how they want to operate once a building is in use.



There are three education spaces. The Activities Room behind the ground-floor reception area and the Clore Seminar Room in the exhibition hall cater largely for teacher and student sessions. The open-plan Clore Mezzanine area above the exhibition hall is used for a variety of educational activities, especially for younger children – the floor was laid so that children can sit or lie on it to work. This area also has full audio-visual links. Café and toilets are adjacent. All three spaces are used for handling sessions. There is a large sink in the Activities Room, which also has 'teaching walls' and projection facilities and leads on to an external courtyard, which visitors can use. However, wet work is also done in the mezzanine space because the education team realised they could use the sink and running water in an adjacent disability toilet.

Activities do have to be carefully scheduled to ensure that quiet sessions are not disrupted by noisy ones nearby. Nevertheless, says Access & Interpretation Manager Jo Green, the education spaces within and above the exhibition hall enable participants to move easily between their own work and reference material.

A more serious problem is the 'flawed logic' in the original plan of assuming that the education spaces need only cater for half a class at a time. In addition, no space was made available for group work in the Library itself. This logic has merely created logistical difficulties. The lack of a specified lunch area is less problematic, because only a small number of Primary-age groups visit the Library.

The difficulties of an enclosed seminar room located within the exhibition hall are highlighted when exhibitions are on – such as cramped areas for viewing and noise problems. Clare Wright explains: 'The ethos of the organisation changed. The original idea was for a home for a special library collection, with a fixed idea about exhibitions of valuable artefacts.' This meant, for example, that the exhibition hall had to have steel-lined doors for security, and unpainted brick walls so that dust would settle on the brick rather than on the objects on display. Exhibition cases are set into exposed brick walls, which are not intended for hanging exhibits except via an inflexible hanging system. This has had to be ignored, and curatorial staff drill into the walls when setting up exhibitions.

Given the restricted site, it was vital that the internal spaces 'were made to work hard'. Thus, many rooms were not labelled for an exclusive use but seen as multi-activity spaces. For example, chairs in the seminar room are lightweight and stackable on trolleys so the room can be used for other activities. The mezzanine level also has adaptable furniture to cater for teaching sessions or dining events, as well as children's workshops.

The requirement to build on a smaller site than was originally intended also led to some inevitable compromises. For example, the locker room is in the basement and the reading room on the third floor, in order not to reduce reading-room space. The same problem of not quite enough room means occasional blockages on stairs and at corners as groups move around.

### Lessons learned

There was always what Maureen Castens calls, 'the difficulty of the bleak honesty of the specification' – in effect, how to negotiate for the right building within the context of a limited, and limiting, site. This was both a design exercise and a political one. 'Maybe we should have been tougher or more overt, because there are some things we might have done differently.'

The building reflects two inevitable tensions when education work and archives are brought together. One is between quiet research and vibrant group activity, which can be largely resolved by careful planning. The other, between accessibility and security, is seen as 'irresolvable', with some of the Library's new participants finding the physical requirements of security 'strict' or 'daunting' and the manifestation of some of the security doors unwelcoming.

Some space has not been used as fully as envisaged – partly because some of the technology plans were lost by agreeing an inadequate budget, and partly because there is some conflict between the intention for flexibility and the reality of designing a space. For example the café was designed with a dual use in mind, and has a white unadorned wall at one end which could work as a lecture and presentation space, but there are no blackout facilities and the service bar is static.

Further, the Library has learnt that flexibility and multi-use can have a limit or 'break-point' relating to the complex organisation required and the occasional internal confusion and conflict about what a space is actually for.

The most important lesson is that organisations change, both in terms of the activities they engage in and of how they want to operate once a building is in use. The challenge faced by both client and architect, says Clare Wright, was to address: 'What happens when a great deal of money is given to a very small organisation to create a quite different sort of organisation ... The Library was changed from being in a basement with ten readers and no education or development programme to what it is today. How best can an organisation plan for that?'

Part of the answer lies in building flexibility into the spaces. In educational terms it also means, for example, clarifying the age ranges to be catered for and the activities to be offered. Given the smallness of the site the architect had to work with, the building is surprisingly adaptable – except for the inflexibility of the exhibition hall. The Library staff are more ambitious than the building design allows for, and they now run programmes in a building not wholly adaptable for their purposes.

### Key factors

The project was driven by the close understanding that existed between its originators, Castens and Hopkin, and Wright & Wright. This collaboration enabled both client and architects to address – if not always to resolve – the contradictions, tensions and complexities of an ever-changing brief, which continues to develop even after the building is complete.

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