

M25 Consortium Annual Conference 2020: The Future of Libraries

Libraries: the most truly democratic space?

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Compiling this conference poster whilst working at home and in lockdown, makes our new library building feel almost anachronistic. Seven years ago our User Brief for the new building aspired to:

- ▶ act as main reception and showcase for the learning activities of KU's 5 faculties which are accommodated across the University's estate;
- ▶ provide learning services, resources and innovative project spaces for all KU students and staff;
- ▶ extend a warm welcome to the local community and visitors from further afield.

The building was never going to be 'just a library' and so this was a very collaborative project from day one with library staff working alongside colleagues from diverse areas of the university. The collaboration soon extended beyond the walls of the university as agreement was reached to house the Borough's highly significant Eadweard Muybridge collection within the new archive whilst renowned artists, such as Mike Nelson, were signed up to create public exhibitions in the foyer space.

We opened on 6 January 2020 and students flooded into the building. In week one usage was up over 70% and we were fielding copious enquiries from staff and public alike wanting to book spaces. This was what Town House was to be about. Welcoming anyone into a space that was so much more than just an academic library. For some staff and students, this was a confusing time as this new space was very different to the old library. Despite a great deal of scenario planning, it had been hard to create a picture of how the new space might come to life.

Grafton Architects quote captures attributes of the building which stretch it beyond being a conventional academic library by challenging people's view of what any library can be. Rowan Moore's suggestion of library as laptop ledge seems a very narrow view of what inspirational learning spaces can contribute to higher education.

Prompted by these statements, we were inspired to carry out research into perceptions of the building in these early days. We set up shop one Saturday with our feedback boards and forms and spoke to students, staff and members of the public and planned on repeating the exercise on a number of weekdays with Stage two (observations) scheduled for the end of March. This research will resume, once it is practical and safe to do so. However, the current pandemic is already giving staff a different perspective on our new space.

You will note that the Grafton quote refers to the "porous" nature of the building. This was a key concept from the start, with the emphasis on crossover and interaction of users and activities. Our original interest in whether this has been realised, and its desirability, has taken on a completely new slant in the current circumstances. Where we once valued space and busyness, we now crave safety and social distancing. Where once we wanted the 'sticky campus', it now feels like we need the 'sticky-stuff remover'. But we have had a glimpse of what Town House can be and how it could really grow into a very different type of library. Never has the phrase, 'watch this space', seemed more apt!