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Visit to Hangzhou

Freedom of information
Cancer information through social media

Book Reviews, Conference Reports

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Book Reviews

University libraries and space in the digital world

Edited by Graham Matthews and Graham Walton. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, xvii, 228pp, ISBN: 9781409423829. £49.50. Hbk.

When asked to review this book I was just coming to the end of a €20 million new building and refurbishment project at NUI Maynooth Library. After living and breathing buildings for more than five years I was curious to see if after reading it would I have done things differently? Later on, I will return to this question. In terms of coverage of aspects of library buildings the book is broad. There are 14 chapters each with extensive and useful references.

Chapter 1 introduces the issues and sets the context. Many of the libraries that influenced our development, including the Information Commons at Sheffield and the wonderful library at the University of Leicester, are mentioned as noteworthy. In Chapter 2, Feather takes a historical perspective in what is a lively and informative gallop from 668BC through to the twentieth century. Chapter 3 illustrates all that is good, and not so good, about this book. It comprises an introduction to some of the theoretical concepts underpinning current approaches to university library space which is neither detailed nor comprehensive and ultimately falls between the two stools. This chapter, due to the number of varied and contradictory approaches available, was always going to be challenging. In the final paragraph the author acknowledges the alluring combination of challenge and reward which are part and parcel of every building project. Chapter 4 is an insightful discussion about library space and technology.

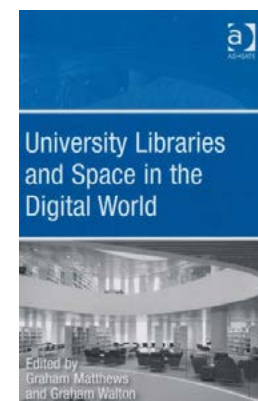
For readers seeking guidance on practical considerations arising in the course of a building project, Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 are very useful. Practical issues around collections, project management, strategy and sharing are well addressed and illustrated using case studies.

I was particularly pleased to read Chapter 9 by Purcell, on the matter of library staff accommodation. In my experience this is a weak point, sometimes intentionally, of many building projects and, indeed, related library research. Subsequently the authors note that library staff space is “rarely mentioned in the literature”(Ch.14). This fact remains baffling to me for an array of reasons but two in particular. Firstly, so much of what libraries achieve is achieved through staff so their effective omission from any aspect of library planning is surely irresponsible? Secondly, many successful companies recognise the impact space has on performance and agonise about how best to accommodate staff to maximise their effectiveness. Surely this applies to library staff too? While Purcell focuses on one particular aspect, open plan areas, the very inclusion of this topic is a small step towards addressing this bizarre imbalance in the scholarly record on library space.

Chapters 10 and 11 draw on US, UK and Australian examples to explore issues around reimaging space for learning and researcher space respectively.

Chapter 12 on evaluation is very timely and amongst the most useful in the book. Evaluation of space and its use is important at a time when evaluation generally is becoming more significant and pointed. Recent trends such as the first national student engagement survey in early 2013, the ongoing reductions in public funding and related pressures will ensure that evaluation will remain a key consideration for the foreseeable future. Specifically in the case of new buildings this chapter is a reminder that the completion of a project is only the beginning. Libraries must develop measures and tools to evaluate the project’s impact and to ensure an appropriate Return on Investment (RoI) demonstrable to internal and external stakeholders.

Green issues which have become increasingly important are considered in



Chapter 13. When conducting research about what NUI Maynooth students wanted from our new library this was consistently their number 2 concern. The fact that their number 1 concern was, contradictorily, more sockets is worth remembering though! Nevertheless for both environmental and economic reasons, not to mention other benefits, green issues will be a key consideration for all future projects.

The final chapter (14) looks to the future with 10 key areas identified. However it is worth noting that the statements in this chapter are based on the views of just 22 respondents and this unavoidably diminishes the weight of the conclusions drawn. There are other weak points in the book too for example the omission of the impact of academic staff on library space in chapter 1 and the lack of depth in many of the chapters. Perhaps this is inevitable in

one book trying, like libraries often do, to be all things to all people? Overall, this is a useful book from which libraries undertaking a project could learn a great deal. It is solid and competent but not exciting and inspiring and from my experience a building project delivers and requires both in large measure. Perhaps there is a gap in the market for a book that can combine the useful theory, analysis and references of this book with the passion and energy required for a successful building project. To answer the question posed at the outset: based on this book I wouldn't have done anything differently but if it had been a book like the one I just described I might have!

*Cathal McCauley, University Librarian, NUI Maynooth, Maynooth, Co Kildare.
Cathal.mccauley@nuim.ie*



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October 2013