From Reference Area to Learning Common – Modernising University Library Space

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Students now use the physical library in another way than before. They come to work (often in groups) and to socialise. This shift in user behaviour necessitates changes of the physical library. The library must be a learning common if the library shall meet the expectations of students. This article presents the work done in the State & University Library, Aarhus, Denmark. It is not only work on architecture, but also changing the organisation and developing new staff competencies.

Keywords: Library space; new user’s behaviour; learning common; State & University Library; Aarhus

Vom Nachschlageraum zu gemeinsamer Lernumgebung – Modernisierung im Bibliotheksgebäude


Schlüsselwörter: Bibliotheksraum; neue Verhaltensweisen der Benutzer; Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek; Aarhus

De la salle de consultation à un entourage d’étude commun la modernisation de l’édifice de la bibliothèque

Aujourd’hui les étudiants se servent des bâtiments de la bibliothèque d’une autre manière qu’avant. Ils restent là pour travailler, souvent en groupe et combinent en même temps les études et les loisirs. Le changement de comportement d’utilisateur demande aussi des changements d’aménagement de la bibliothèque. Cet article présente les efforts dans cette domaine faites par la Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire; Aarhus, Danemark.

Mots-clés: Bâtiment de la bibliothèque; nouveau comportement d’utilisateur; Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire; Aarhus

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1 Introduction

More and more library material and more and more library services are digital, and users serve themselves on the net. At the same time students flock to university library build-

ings. This may seem paradoxical. But that is not the case as students now use the physical library in another way than before. Generally users no longer come to the library to get access to books and journals, they come to work (often in groups) and to socialise. This shift in user behaviour is the incentive to change the working of the physical library. The library must be an information common or a learning common if the library shall meet the expectations of students of today. Students often work in groups, use technology avidly, and combine their academic and social lives.

Many libraries are working on this, and this article will present the work done in the State & University Library, Aarhus, Denmark. It

is not only work on layout, furniture and other architectural features. It is also changing the organisation and developing new staff competencies.

The State & University Library is a national library and university library for Aarhus University. In a few words the library’s building history is: the library moved to its present building on the university campus in 1963. The building was designed by the university’s architect, C. F. Möller, and built of yellow brick like the university buildings.

The building of the State & University Library is characterised by the 45 metre “book tower” containing 17 storeys of stacks. At the base of the tower there are two parallel two-storey buildings connected by two wings.

In the park in front of the library two underground stacks have been constructed, and in 2006 a new building with stacks and some offices was ready for use (located on the outskirts of Aarhus). Since 1995 the State & University Library has spent 10 Mio. Euro on three major projects of refurbishment of premises for library users.

2 Renewal and preservation

Preservation ethics is a much discussed topic. The question is how much you can change an artefact before it loses its identity and becomes something else. This has also been a question in planning the refurbishment of the State & University Library. All buildings on the Aarhus campus are subject to preservation regulations as the buildings are prominent examples of Scandinavian functionalism, and are included in the official national architectural canon. On the one hand you have to preserve the buildings as they were constructed, on the other hand you must meet new user expectations, at least if you want to stay relevant. And users did want changes! All refurbishment projects have been based on user surveys. The first one was a comprehensive survey of general user satisfaction which identified the physical environment as the only really critical point. As a response architects were engaged to make a renovation plan which was then implemented. The overall aim was to create better lay-out and contemporary design. Key concepts were openness, light and space: public premises should be inviting and better connected than before.

In order to obtain the desired improvement of the physical environment it was necessary to add new elements and use...
Fig. 2: Aerial view of the library building. In addition to the book tower there are two parallel buildings connected with two wings. SB-Photo.

new materials. But in view of the preservation regulations a delicate balance had to be found between preserving original elements and adding new ones. The old reading room has been preserved in its original design whereas the centre of the building was redesigned (Fig 3).

The focal point of the modernisation was the construction of a new atrium in the centre of the library and construction of a rotunda with bridges to the surrounding areas (Fig. 4).

More seats and desks were made available for students. But it was still a ‘traditional’ reference area with quite a lot

Fig. 3: The reading room from 1963 has not been changed. SB-Photo
of printed reference material, and space was divided according to university subjects. There was a reference area for each of the main groups of university subjects: arts and humanities; science; social science. (Medical science is being served from the university’s medical education centre). A break with this organising principle has now been made in response to new user expectations.

3 Differentiation and functional division

Quite often users do not use space as it was intended by planners and this fact demonstrate the need for information about user behaviour and expectations when changing a library building. The ongoing modernisation of the State & University Library is based on a user survey focusing solely on the building (layout, facilities, signs etc.) and on data of actual use (regular counts of which areas are used how during the day, during the week etc.). The survey and the data identified the following issues:

- Need for more working space, especially space for group work
- Need for graduation of exposure to sound
- Still need for staff, but with different tasks than before
- Food and beverages are important
- Quite a few potential users do not know the services available in the physical library.

The State & University Library is now working with these issues, and the following will give a brief description on how that is done.

3.1 Sectionalising

The number of individual seats is kept as it is (230 seats) whereas the number of group seats is increased (from 28 to 106), some of them in separate rooms which users can book from home. This is made possible by discarding reference material (and removing shelving). Most of the relevant reference material is accessible online and the material which is not digital is rarely used. Group seats are not equipped with computers, users prefer to use their own laptops. Signs show which zone you are in (group zone, silent zone, lounge zone, relax zone) and the experience is that users will enforce such functional division, there is no need for staff to do that.

3.2 Staffing

Unstaffed libraries are a new phenomenon in the Danish library world, and you can find them both as public library branches and as departmental libraries in institutions of higher education. So far unstaffed libraries are few but efforts at cost-cutting may make the number grow. The State & University Library’s learning common will have staff. But staff will have different tasks than before and as a consequence other competences are needed. Also less staff is needed in the new learning common as staff will be concentrated in a “service centre” in the main atrium room of the library. All positions in the new service centre were advertised internally as an indication that this is something new and different.

Until now services were supplied by small specialised teams in different locations of the reference area (reading room, music, checking in and out), and the reference area was staffed on the assumption that users asked subject specific questions. They still do, but more often than not they do it by e-mail. Data show that users who come in the library building have questions of a more general nature (how to register as user, how the printers work, how the library’s search system works etc.). A competence development course is an integral part of the refurbishment project. The competence development course includes both personal competencies (communication, team building) and professional competencies (introduction to new digital material, update on technical facilities etc.).

3.3 Socialising

Obviously people come to the library to use library specific services and facilities. But they also come to meet others and work together which they could do in another place than the library, and they want to have a nice time. This has consequences for layout of the library building and how you furnish it and lots of shelves with books and journals are no longer the appropriate decoration. The library has also changed the traditional attitude to drink and food in the library. Access to beverages and food is considered an integral part of learning, not something to get over with in a cafete-
As new facilities for the public there will be a relax zone with ‘Nintendo Wii’ and an exquisite coffee bar as well as a lounge zone for the more laid-back kind of work.

3.4 Marketing

Establishing an up-to-date learning common demands investment and the more users the more return on investment! The State & University Library has a steady influx of visitors (approx. 375,000 per year), so there is no crisis as regards the use of the physical library. But user surveys demonstrated that potential users do not know what they can get. The aim is not to increase the number of visitors at all costs, the aim is to give potential users the possibility of an informed choice of library facilities and services. To attain this it is planned to launch targeted information campaigns with regular intervals, using the library’s website as well as traditional methods such as leaflets.

Also another kind of marketing is being planned. As a national library the State & University Library has a lot of cultural heritage material, especially audio-visual material. It is less known and less used than other library material, so why not expose some of it to users when they come to the library anyway? It is of course important to find the right way to do it and avoid that users feel “force-fed with culture”, and here is room for innovation.

4 Conclusion

The internet is now the primary place where scholars and students find information and documentation. This does not mean that the physical library, the library building, can be written off as a relict from the Gutenberg era of printed books and journals. The physical library still has a role as a learning common. To have this role efforts in a range of fields are necessary: architecture, organisation, marketing, and efforts should be based on information about user behaviour and user expectations.

The development of the digital library and the development of the physical library will follow different tracks. There is a challenge here also for library management. It would be an interesting topic to pursue, but it is not within the scope of this short article. The aim of this article has been to describe how a library can develop its physical facilities with limited resources and with limitations posed by preservation restrictions. The aim of refurbishments projects in the State & University Library is to keep the library a “buzzing house” and a place of inspiration and recreation, learning and innovation. It is a never-ending job as user expectations change.