



Southwark's 'stunning exemplar' library: modest investment for maximum effect

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Abstract:

When in December 2009 the UK Culture Minister, Margaret Hodge, visited the refurbished John Harvard Library in Southwark, London, she commented that it was "a stunning exemplar of the sort of practice we would like to see mirrored right across the country of a very welcoming environment, fantastic layout, good facilities for children and great facilities for people to learn." A librarian on site wrote "The public reaction to the library has been phenomenal – I've seen people wandering around the library smiling and saying out loud to themselves "This is fantastic"; people on the phone to their friends telling them that they have to get down there to see how brilliant it is".

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The modernisation of the John Harvard Library was made possible by the award of £1.42m to Southwark Council by the Big Lottery Fund Community Libraries programme.

Without this it would not have happened, particularly in the economic conditions of the present time: importantly, there was no match funding required from the Council.

This award was the catalyst that allowed Southwark libraries to relaunch their approach to service. The completion of the John Harvard scheme is the forerunner to the new Canada Water Library which is under construction and will open in summer 2011. John Harvard

Library has been the ideal opportunity to test new ideas for community engagement, the planning and presentation of services, and the introduction of self-service / RFID technology within a revitalised public space.

The process

Southwark Council has a standard way of procuring its consultants and contractors. They selected their architects, Alexi Marmot Associates (AMA), through a competitive interview which outlined the firm's approach, experience and reactions to the existing facility. The construction firm was also selected after a tender process from fully designed information. AMA was chosen because they had substantial library and learning environment experience, a positive approach to making better use of space, and proven track record in developing sensitive and complex briefs through stakeholder engagement.

The briefing, design and procurement process was as follows:

- The budget and timescale was quickly established for the whole project, as was the way the outline brief would be developed.
- A detailed brief for the library was prepared right at the beginning of the work to meet the key requirements of the Big Lottery Fund's framework for the community libraries programme. Without getting this right, developing the right approach to designing the facility, broadening its services, and making it more accessible, then the project would fail.

The Project Team prepared the brief by engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, holding public meetings, and continuing to review proposals as they emerged. In particular we set out to:

Look at the way the library worked in its earlier form and learn, from both the users and the staff.

Review with the client their aspirations for the project, how they saw the library would need to change, to resolve issues they knew were impeding the user experience, how they wanted to integrate technology, safety and provision of a café.

Listen to the public through consultations and engage with council officers to make best use of their experience. This was done via a series of managed open workshops for the public, broadly advertised, and carried out at a number of stages in the design development. Local users and residents were encouraged to contribute in as broad a way as possible and all comments were carefully recorded and incorporated where possible. Staff were involved in regular team meetings that drew on their experience, where they discussed how to do things better, and were encouraged to think about how they could offer better services for the next generation of users as well as their existing loyal customers.

Learn from others, by visiting similar facilities, seeing what was good and what could be improved upon. There are many public and university libraries that have recently been refurbished and we made the most of their experience.

- AMA set out to understand the existing building, its constraints and opportunities, and make the most of what it offered. Conceived 30 years ago, the building could be rearranged to provide many opportunities to not only gain more space but to make better use of it and to

make it much more attractive. Security, acoustics, and in particular the location of the main entrance were investigated and options tabled. By stripping the building back to its most basic components, many improvements were identified, most of them being simple to achieve.

- Having established a brief and with the knowledge of what the building could offer, AMA developed a 'match'. AMA's approach was to keep the briefing and building appraisal work separate and then 'match' them to create a range of options. This allowed the team to analyse and debate the merits of each, and to estimate the relative costs. The team then shortlisted the options and by a process of elimination, relatively quickly decided on the proposal that the whole team believed would offer the best opportunities for the future. This inclusive method of involving the client and the professional team in decisions continued throughout the project and helped secure its success.
- The design was developed using the knowledge of how the original structure and layout could be maximised. For example the existing coffered concrete ceiling was revealed during demolitions (it could not be seen before because of asbestos above the old ceiling). Materials were chosen for their ability to reflect light: white was the colour of choice, except for adding highlights. This was partly a reaction to the original brown and gloomy interior, but also a desire to provide space and light in a largely internal environment. Large windows without blinds achieved the same objective, as well as providing a visually accessible environment. The design was developed closely with the client and the staff, and issues such as furniture, colours, products, graphics and signage all selected to produce an integrated whole. Graphics were added showing John Harvard, local buildings, and graphic art. Murals donated by a children's book publisher lent an element of warmth to the children's area.
- The overall theme was one of lightness and simplicity, using basic models of furniture slightly adapted. In particular, the white standard metal shelving was deliberately kept low, and then customised by adding end panels in white Corian and signage. This enabled a clear, bold and simply adaptable system to fit in with the overall approach to the interior: all elements visually well coordinated.
- Costs of all elements were carefully considered to support strategic decisions about where maximum value could be achieved. The budget for the project was fixed, and during the design development the team had to continually assess where expenditure was best placed to achieve a radically different and lasting facility. As with all refurbishment projects, unforeseen issues arose, particularly after exposing the existing building structure which inevitably led to additional costs. As a seasoned client, Southwark's policy in projects such as this is to hold back a reasonably large amount of money to deal with unknown problems during construction. This proved to be a wise and practical approach that avoided compromising the delivery of the interior, public spaces in the quest for last minute financial savings.

The challenges

Most refurbishment projects of this scale find some unexpected issues during the procurement and construction process, and the John Harvard Library was no exception. Most issues were relatively minor and easily resolved. Working in an occupied building proved to be straightforward with good relationships established early by the contractor. The only issue here

was that drains from the offices above leaked just after completion, but that has now been dealt with.

The most significant issue was the substructure. The new design extended the internal floor area by enclosing an external walkway that had formerly attracted anti social behaviour and was frequented by homeless 'rough sleepers'. Small trial holes carried out whilst the library was still in occupation failed to establish the nature of the ground below, or the footing for the existing columns. Major excavation during construction eventually showed that the new extension could be supported on the existing columns and an existing basement wall. This basement belonged to the adjacent owner and was only discovered at this stage as it was not shown on any drawings or known about by Southwark. Rapid redesign by the structural engineer and reprogramming by the contractor minimised delay.

After the library was opened in November 2009, there was a forced entry into the building overnight in January 2010, perhaps due to the high visibility of the library contents from the street. This caused damage to the main doors and glazing and a quantity of library stock was stolen. Entry was difficult, but eventually achieved by causing major damage to the main entrance doors. These have now been replaced and the levels of security and surveillance increased. We realise that these systems are only a deterrent, but they will hopefully have the desired effect.

The end result

This major modernisation project has:

- increased the total floorspace,
- added a cafe where people can read, work and study in a relaxed environment,
- rebalanced the layout to provide more public space
- dramatically increased the lighting,
- made the library more visible and welcoming for passers-by,
- introduced better services and improved technology

Overall we know that it has proved to be great success. It has succeeded in welcoming back the original users, and has attracted many new ones. It now has a true community use, with almost 100 people taking up adult education options last month, and a broad and healthy mix of daily activities for children, teens, and adults.

The actual usage figures have more than doubled in the six months that it has been open: the number of visitors has risen from 9,000 a month before refurbishment to a current count of over 20,000 a month. From an initial monthly gain in the region of almost 2,000 new users, this has levelled out to a consistent figure of about 900 new users registering every month. In addition, there does not appear to be a significant fall-off from the original users.

John Harvard is the pioneer library in Southwark to introduce RIFD/ self service technology, a major step forward. The new Canada Water Library will operate using self service and other sites will follow as part of the future modernisation programme. Public reaction to self service

has been very positive and this enables the staff to do more work away from the counter areas to help people in their use of the library and to organise a wider range of events.

Southwark council announced the reopening of the library in November 2009 with a high profile communications campaign. This included banners on the High Street, advertisements in the local underground station, press articles, website features and publicity which were distributed ahead of the opening to local residents, schools and businesses. Support from Big Lottery Fund was noted in all the publicity, on the signage board outside the library and as part of the internal signage. Officials from the Big Lottery Fund together with senior councillors and officers attended the launch event. The initial response from the public on entering the newly modernised library was very positive with people expressing delight with the overall increase in space and the design and layout of the library.

A post occupancy evaluation is currently taking place to evaluate the impact of the library after its first few months. The purpose of this is to gain real data on how it is performing, in all aspects including:

- Throughput of people: how is this increasing and in what areas? What new types of users are being attracted?
- How is the introduction of a cafe appreciated? Does it attract more passers-by and introduce them to the library? Does it help the parent and children sessions (as it was conceived as being an extension of the children's area and an attractive place for waiting)? Does its inevitable increase in noise deter from the traditional quiet library feel?
- How is the furniture performing and helping the users? Is the shelving accessible enough? Is the seating comfortable and suitable for all its intended uses? Is there sufficient power available for laptop users and is it easily available?
- What is the environment like? How comfortable is it?
- Are the finishes and fixture robust enough? What is performing well, and are there any areas that need improving?
- Are the self service units in the right locations? Are they sufficiently simple to use? And do they help save time?
- Is the technology right for the users? Are there sufficient computers for the public, with the right software? Are there enough printers?

Finally, what would we have done differently?

Most things have worked out very well. It is a small library which was deliberately kept very open to maintain a feeling of space, sightlines, and safety. But as always, a few things might have been tackled differently:

- Locating the self service machines in separate locations. These were designed to be re-locatable, and probably will be in the future.
- Protecting the children's area in a different way. The sliding gate is difficult to manage.

- Improving the specification of some of the finishes, particularly the joinery, which is taking a lot of abuse. This was a budget issue, but in retrospect it should have received a greater portion of the available funds.
- Providing tougher entrance doors to give the impression of greater strength and security. These have since been changed.

The greatest single contribution has to be the simple gesture of moving the entrance to where it should have been in the first place – at the very front of the library.

Now the library is fully fit for purpose providing a major contribution to the local community, supporting education and creating a place for learning and reading, but most of all, a place that readily welcomes the local community.

David Jenkin RIBA

David Jenkin is Design Director at AMA Alexi Marmot Associates and specialises in user-focussed design. He is an architect with over 30 years experience with many award winning projects. These projects always concentrate on matching operational requirements with imaginative design. Recent library projects with which David has been involved include the Nottingham University Hallward Library refurbishment, Sheffield Hallam University Adsetts Learning Centre and the National Library of Greece.

Pam Usher BA (Hons), DMS MCILIP

Pam Usher has been the Library Service Manager for the London Borough of Southwark since May 2006. Prior to this she was the Head of Cultural Services in Barnet where the Library Service was awarded Beacon Status, and she has experience of managing all aspects of public library services in the London boroughs of Ealing and Camden. Pam has served on the national Advisory Council for Libraries and in 2000 she was President of the Association of London Chief Librarians.

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