



Waterside Campus: the space is adaptable, a key feature of all contemporary library design thinking. Photo © Jim Stephenson/MCW Architects

Designing Libraries

This is not a library

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THE Waterside Campus of the University of Northampton, designed by MCW Architects, opened in September 2018. I went along to see the new Learning Hub and speak with Chris Powis, Head of Library & Learning Services.

What makes the Learning Hub interesting and unique, at least in the UK, is the blurring of all formal boundaries between library and learning centre, learning and teaching spaces, and between staff, faculty and student areas. “The new Waterside campus has no faculty buildings, no separate teaching blocks, no library or IT Centre,” said Chris. “We have moved to paperless working and a Bring Your Own Device IT policy for students. An Active Blended Learning approach means that there is no need for traditional lecture theatres and all staff will work in shared spaces.”

Northampton defines Active Blended Learning as first and foremost “learner-centred and interactions based: a suitable balance between learner-tutor, learner-learner and learner-content interactions, face-to face (university-based and outside) and online.”

A cultural shift

The design of the new Learning Hub requires a cultural shift, a change of habits and familiar practice, and the relinquishing of any sort of proprietorial ownership of designated spaces – something that will be tested over the coming months.

But the design had always been conceived as a democratic and collaborative process, worked out in advance of the move to the university’s new home. “The Learning Hub brings together the three elements of the

student learning experience (people, resources and spaces) and integrates them across one building. The move has required all staff to embrace a different ethos in the use of space that sees the whole campus as a shared space with the facilitation of learning as its primary purpose.”

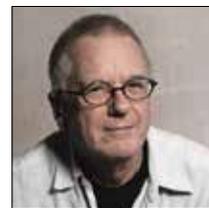
So is this a “library”? “This is not a library. At least it’s not a library in the sense of a separate building. It’s a fully integrated element of the teaching and learning process and experience. We have resources of course, but a reduced physical book stock of around 200,000, located on different floors. Most of our resources are online.”

What is impressive to the visitor’s eye is the variety of spaces the building offers. The closest you get to a lecture theatre are modestly sized rooms with informal table layouts that can easily be moved around. There are lots of small, bookable rooms for personal study or collaborative work, flexible teaching rooms, informal breakout areas and private quiet study spaces across all of the building’s five floors. At any moment you might discover a sofa, a bench, an acoustic booth or a winged armchair – and take your pick.

The space is flexible and adaptable, a key feature of all contemporary library design thinking. “It shouldn’t be difficult to change the use of areas, either quickly for short-term use or in the medium/long term based on use and feedback. Little is fixed and this is especially true where BYOD supplemented by laptops for loan has replaced fixed PCs.”

“We want the technology to be fabulous”

Needless to say, the technology – from security gates to booking systems to screen-based communications – is



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vital to the success of this innovative new learning space. “The technology has to work. We’ve built it from scratch to be what we want it to be, and we want it to be fabulous.”

“Waterside” means waterside. The campus is a short walk from the town centre in proximity to river and canal. It’s a popular walking area, with public restaurants on the site. “The connections to the town are important. The public are welcome to become members and use the study spaces and physical resources. We will be holding events and exhibitions, and we hope to actively encourage community groups to make use of the space.”

Waterside, by redefining the learning experience is also redefining what we mean by library. If that still remains to be proven, at least you can be sure that really is a tapas bar on the fourth floor... **IP**