

# Thirty Years and Three New Libraries: Learning on the Job

**Abstract:** The following article, written by Amanda Saville, is a summary of the author's experiences as the client for three major new library buildings. It attempts to provide some advice and help for others contemplating a new library or significant refurbishment project by taking readers through the various stages of a development project. It assumes that the reader has no prior experience of managing building projects and offers some practical suggestions for a library client to consider. The projects on which the author was involved are listed at the end of the article and readers who would like to learn more are encouraged to go to the websites of the three institutions as all of them include detailed information and many images of the buildings.

**Keywords:** building projects; library renovation; library refurbishment; libraries

## INTRODUCTION: LET'S START AT THE VERY BEGINNING

Library schools do not teach many practical skills, or at least they didn't when I was an MA in Librarianship student in Sheffield in the mid 1980s. The understanding was that library school taught us theory and the practical skills would be learnt at the book face, and, to an extent, that is exactly what happened. I learnt the theory of answering reference enquiries but it wasn't until I was in my first professional job, and I experienced MPs rushing from the Chamber to the House of Commons Library to ask a question about what a Minister had just said, that I really learnt how to disentangle what they thought they wanted from what they really wanted, and more importantly the skills to find an accurate answer at speed. Nearly all library and information workers learn the bread and butter of the profession in this way and generally it works. However, there is one area which never appears to be covered in professional training, an area in which many colleagues find themselves facing a once-in-a-career challenge. That is being expected to take the lead at the centre of a high value project of extreme importance to their organisation, with little or no training or experience, as the library client for a major refurbishment or new build. I found myself in this position two years after qualification when I became Librarian of St John's College, Cambridge just as the College began to contemplate a major library development project. I found myself thrown in at the deep end, a deep end in which I would find myself twice more in my library career, as client for two further new buildings: a new public library in Brighton and Hove and a second college library, this time for The Queen's College Oxford. The following paper seeks to share some of those experiences and

offers some suggestions as to how to manoeuvre through the various minefields and pitfalls you will find scattered in your way.

## ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT

One of the most important aspects of any building project, large or small, is to ensure buy-in from the parent organisation and a clear financial commitment to seeing the project through to completion. As an information professional in charge of a library in a building which is not fit for purpose, the need for improvements, radical or otherwise, is usually very clear to us. It is very easy for our enthusiasm for a project to blind us to the fact that others in the organisation may not see the library's needs as such an important priority as we do and there are more than likely to be competing projects lined up on the financial officer's wish list. Unless there is a large gift from a donor with a specific desire to fund a new library, building projects generally come about for two main reasons. A major new building often derives from a growing recognition of the importance of the library to the organisation's aims, coupled with a belief that improving the building will enhance the reputation of the organisation as a whole, especially with regard to local or national competitors. Smaller extensions or renovation projects are more usually a response to an accretion of building issues and problems over time, often coupled with user concerns and complaints. The two are not mutually exclusive and it is possible for a project initially conceived as a renovation or small extension to gather momentum and support as it goes along and to end up as a major new building. I had this experience myself in my first new library. In either situation I would recommend playing a long game and spending as much time as you can demonstrating the

issues and concerns with the building without necessarily moving early towards a particular solution. It is essential to document and record building issues over time, whether they are lack of space for collections and readers, environmental concerns, poor storage, failing building services or regular structural defects and to report on them regularly to the organisational hierarchy. Equally important is to be aware of improvements and developments in the libraries of competitor institutions and to be able to draw comparisons with your own situation, particularly if the competitor's development has given, or appears to give them an advantage over your own institution in terms of recruitment or performance. If you have these data to hand it will be infinitely easier to garner support for your project from within your institution.

### SITE ISSUES: REFURBISHMENT OR NEW BUILD?

Once you have proven the need that something needs to be done about a failing library building, and have established a strong body of support from within your own organisation there is often a tension between a desire for a (relatively) quick fix renovation or extension versus a longer term larger project involving a substantial new building element. It is at this stage that the question of site often looms large and can become a major stumbling block. Libraries sited in city centres, or as part of a collection of other buildings, have multiple constraints ranging from shared spaces with other parts of the organisation to a complete lack of development space nearby often coupled with limitations imposed by conservation areas and listed buildings. Many organisations at this point in a project go round and round in circles trying to solve the problem of location before they have actually defined exactly what they need and before they have sought any professional architectural or planning advice.

A more workable solution is to first define the need by writing a detailed, well researched brief which should get strong support from the organisation before moving to step two, which is starting to define possible solutions, including the location of any development.

### WRITING A BRIEF

Many librarians faced with writing a brief for a new library building do not know where to start but it is actually a much simpler task than you might imagine. By the time you have got to this stage in the project you should already have the numbers to hand for how much extra storage space, reading space or staff space you require as this will have formed part of your campaign to achieve institutional buy in. You then need to produce a relatively small amount of detail for each type of space by defining its use and size more closely and describing what you are seeking.

For example "An exhibition space which can be easily accessed by non-members of the institution but which

can be alarmed and secured separately from the rest of the building. The space must contain six horizontal and six vertical display cases, each of which must be separately locked, alarmed and environmentally controlled. There must be provision for a security desk/pay station at the entrance and a flexible wall system for changing the exhibition information panels".

It is not worth at this stage going into any more detail as that is part of the brief development stage that will be undertaken once you have appointed an architect.

Once you have defined each space to this sort of detail the next step is to decide locations and co-locations of all the proposed spaces. It is useful at this point to lay out all the required spaces using either a suitable computer design package or more simply paper and scissors, moving them round to achieve optimum co-locations and, more importantly, to make clear what spaces must be separated from each other.

One simple way to present this information is as an appendix to the brief setting out all the areas you have previously described in one column and in the following two columns list the areas each space should be near to (ideally) and where (preferably) there should be some form of separation:

Space	Near to	Separate From
Conservation	Special Collections	Quiet Reading
Studio	Store	Areas
	Delivery Bay	Cafe

Once the space planning details of the brief have been defined, other sections, which are unlikely to be the responsibility of the library team, should be appended. These will include financial and environmental statements as well as information about the constraints as currently understood including planning, site, issues with neighbours, etc.

### SITE CHOICE? DIVIDED LIBRARY VERSUS INSUFFICIENT SPACE?

A clear, well written brief supported by the parent institution, and particularly by the finance officers, will often lead seamlessly on to a discussion about location. Sadly this is often the time when the consensus gained by careful project development so far will begin to break down. There is seldom anything more divisive in an institution than raising the spectre of a new development in a much loved green space, or the conversion or possible demolition of real estate not previously given over to the library. Historic institutions in particular are often faced with a dilemma about whether to leave an existing library building altogether and build on a new site, (if a suitable site is available), or whether keep aspects of the library's activities in its original historic home and build a new space contiguous with the original building or in another part of the estate altogether. However well we think we know our buildings it is at this point that an architect should be appointed. From a librarian's perspective it is very easy to become determined on a particular solution

which seems best to you, either because it doesn't divide the library, or perhaps because it does, and it can be difficult to resolve these issues internally. When faced with dilemmas like this it is important to keep calm and to keep focused on the end goal, which is an improvement in the services and facilities of your library. Sometimes 'perfect' needs to give way to 'perfectly good'. In two out of my three new library projects the internal discussion about locations were so divisive they led to delays and dissent only solved when an external professional architect with years of experience of similar projects, came up with a site solution which no-one internal to the organisation had previously considered. Agreement was then reached and the project could continue.

## CHOOSING AN ARCHITECT

Choosing the architect is unlikely to be the sole responsibility of the library professionals but it is very important that the librarian is as closely involved as possible in the selection process as they will hopefully be working very closely with the design team. There are various approved routes to the selection of a project team which are clearly set out by the RIBA. In most cases there is likely to be an architectural competition either by invitation, or, for very large projects, an open procurement process. Competitions take time and good management, and having a brief already drawn up makes the whole process much simpler for the client body. The library team will usually be involved in showing prospective architectural practices the existing buildings and answering numerous questions about the concerns and issues which have led to the instigation of the project. Although library projects are not unusual there are often architectural practices who have never considered one before and they will need a fair amount of bringing up to speed on library issues and terminology. It may seem safer to only invite firms with proven track records on library projects but I think many innovative solutions emerge from considering library issues afresh. The competition may be a two stage project, where a number of firms first produce an outline scheme and then two or three are asked to go into more detail. It is at this point that the client team may be surprised by a proposal which meets all the requirements of the brief by coming up with a radical site solution which will meet the 'not in my backyard' concerns of the rest of the institution. If one of your competition entries is able to achieve this you are on to a winner, as I was on two occasions.

## DEVELOPING THE BRIEF WITH THE CHOSEN TEAM: DOES THIS NEED TO CHANGE NOW AN ARCHITECT AND A SITE HAVE BEEN SELECTED

If your brief is fit for purpose it will now form the basis of the ongoing discussions with the design team as the

project is developed and signed off through the various RIBA stages. It is at this point that you and the design team - which will now contain structural and environmental engineers, a quantity surveyor and a number of other specialists in addition to the architects - will really begin to get to know each other. As the team produce drawings for you to consider there should be a regular exchange of ideas and information in which the project will begin to develop a life of its own. There will be disagreements and misunderstandings on both sides but there should also be lightbulb moments when a solution is found to a tricky problem or when both sides begin to understand the thought processes of the other and to appreciate each other's professional skills and attributes. In one of my projects the project architect became so interested in classification that he almost considered changing profession! It is at this stage in the project that the brief is expanded to include much more detail. This should be done in agreement with the design and in-house project teams and it is now that a client librarian really needs to learn how to read and understand architectural drawings. You are likely to receive drawings almost every day and if you are to keep on top of the project you should look at them as soon as possible and try to understand them so that you are able to pick up on any changes you have not previously agreed, notice new details or any omissions. If your relationship with the design team is successful you and they will be able to find a way through the process with compromise and understanding on both sides. The project will evolve and change during this stage and you are likely both to be pleasantly surprised by imaginative solutions and to need to stand your ground to ensure the practicalities you need are not 'designed out' of the building. It is also useful to be careful about where you put your energy. In all of my projects my main concern was to achieve a functional library building which met the needs of the brief and improved facilities for library users and staff. Although I had reasonably strong opinions about aesthetics I did not become engaged in many of those discussions. As long as it worked I was happy. Other members of the institution's project team spent a considerable time discussing and choosing colours and architectural detailing. I stuck to functionality and tried to be neutral in the other areas, keeping my arguments for the things I considered more important to the success of the project.

## PROJECT MOMENTUM AND PLANNING ISSUES

As the design progresses through the various RIBA stages and sign offs one extremely useful tip, especially if the design runs into difficulties, is to learn from others' experiences and mistakes by visiting as many comparable new buildings as possible, preferably with the architect and other members of your institution's project team. Visits do not always have to be to library projects, useful

though those undoubtedly are, as a clever solution for any type of building in a constrained city centre site or listed building, may well offer solutions for your project. It is good to visit other buildings by your design team but equally good to visit new buildings by different architects. The former will show you in three dimensions some of the detailing you might be struggling to understand on a drawing and it is usual that details of door furniture, toilets, joinery etc. are repeated from project to project. The latter can provide inspiration for both the design team and the client, particularly if the energy is flagging as the planning part of the project can take several years. It is essential during this long process for the internal project team to keep the institution as a whole regularly updated about progress on the project so that enthusiasm and commitment can be maintained. It is also at this stage that a process called value engineering may take place. This is a construction euphemism for making savings on the building before it goes for planning permission and out to tender and there can be a fair amount of internal dissent at this stage. From a librarian's perspective it is essential to know what you are willing to sacrifice and what must remain in the scheme to meet the brief. It is at this point that you might be grateful that you did not participate too enthusiastically in the choice of expensive fabrics and finishes, which can easily be sacrificed on the altar of cost savings! Most institutions require a formal sign-off of the final detailed design before the project can move forward and this milestone is eased by keeping all the key decision makers informed of changes and development to the scheme as they occur.

At the end of this process, once all is agreed internally, the next step is to apply for planning permission and listed building consent if required. This can also be a lengthy process and is usually handled by the architect on behalf of the client although many projects also employ planning consultants to help get approval. It is usual and advisable for the design team to be in contact with the appropriate planners at a very early stage of any project. Local authority and amenity groups representatives (such as English Heritage or Historic Scotland) will visit your library throughout the process and it is usually the job of the librarian to show them round. If all goes well planning and listed building consent will be granted although there are likely to be a number of conditions with regard to both the detailing of some design elements and construction processes.

## **CONSTRUCTION**

Construction can be one of the most exciting parts of any project. It is thrilling to see the building which you have hoped for and worked for over many years slowly emerging out of the ground. It can also be a stressful and difficult time as unexpected difficulties are not unusual and problems with supply or the weather can cause significant delays. You are unlikely as librarian to get to know the day-to-day concerns of the contractor at the

beginning of a project but as the building grows and the time for you to take over as end user approaches, you will get to know the site manager very well, especially if your new building is contiguous with an existing library space that is still in use. One of the joys of this stage of the project is to go on site visits, preferably with members of your team, who might not have been as involved in the project as you but who will have been working hard behind the scenes to prepare collections for the forthcoming moves. In some projects which take years from conception to fruition it is only as they see the office space which they will soon inhabit take shape that members of library staff finally believe that the mythical beast of the new library is about to happen. Encouraging enthusiasm for the project in your team is absolutely essential as their hard work is about to begin.

## **MOVE PLANNING**

The building may be nearing completion, and the architects and contractors starting to think about their next project, but for the library team the most stressful and demanding time of the project is about to begin. Planning collection moves should really have started at the same time as planning the building, particularly if collections scattered across multiple sites are to be housed together for the first time. Writing the brief all those years before should have quantified what you are about to be moving but the reality can be very different several years on. It is advisable at this point to appoint a move leader from among your team. In some smaller libraries you may have to take on this role yourself but as there are likely to be many other things calling for your attention having a dedicated move officer is a huge advantage. All librarians will have had experience of book moves in their professional lives but moving a whole library is a massive undertaking and requires detailed planning and a logistical awareness. In the major moves I have managed I have used both in-house teams and specialist library removers. Both have advantages and disadvantages. In-house teams already know the buildings from which they are moving stock and are usually more flexible in when they can work. However, in my experience employing a specialist library move contractor is a huge advantage as not only are they quick and skilled in book handling but they are able to estimate crate numbers and capacity and plan the requirements of the move. Things will go wrong, even with specialist contractors, and it is essential if possible to build in some extra time. One thing which no-one ever thinks about is the capacity of any lift you may be using to move collections. Lifts going wrong can hold moves up more than any other element so do think about that when timetabling your major book moves.

## **SNAGGING**

At last the building is complete and the last book is on the shelves. The office spaces are still full of boxes and

the signage is not quite finished but your readers are at the door and it is time to welcome them back into the library. Anyone who has experienced the disruption of a major building project cannot wait to reclaim the space for the library team and the readers. We need time to learn how the new spaces work and to start to offer the high quality services to our users we promised them at the start of the whole process. In all probability you are very unlikely to be able to wave goodbye to the contractors or the design team for a while. For upwards of 3 months, sometimes longer, some members of the contractor's team will remain on site, possibly even camping out in your staff areas as their site huts will have been dismantled, to undertake 'snagging'. Snagging, a term I had never heard of until my first library project, is undertaking remedial work to defects in the building while the contract period is still active. However well constructed a building, there is always snagging, and it always seems to take several months. The design team will not sign off on the finished building until the snagging list is complete and it often feels never ending so it's best to be prepared. Sometimes it can be extremely helpful to have the contractor on hand to offer advice about running your new building so it should also be seen as an opportunity to pick their brains and learn more about your new space.

## CELEBRATION

At long last the snagging will be over and the contract signed off, and you and your institution can turn your attention to planning opening ceremonies and celebrations. These are great PR opportunities both for internal and external participants and although exhausting and stressful to plan and organise are hugely rewarding. You may consider a series of events, a big thank you for the benefactors followed by a press day and an open house to other interested professionals and a party for the workers. Whatever form the celebrations take do enjoy

them to the full and document them so that in years to come you can look back at what was probably the most significant achievement of your library career.

## CONCLUSIONS

Becoming the library client for a major new building is often a once in a career opportunity. Many library professionals take on the role without any prior training or experience. I urge anyone undertaking a major building project to see it as a hugely enjoyable challenge where you will be working with like minded professionals from many different areas of expertise. Take your time in the early stages, get to know your institution's needs, measure and plan, work with rather than against your architects and you will find the experience rewarding beyond all expectations. At the end of a successful project your expertise will have formed part of a living, growing building which will stand as testament to what you can achieve.

## APPENDIX: THE PROJECTS

1. New Library and refurbishment for St John's College, Cambridge  
Completed 1993  
Architects: Edward Cullinan Architects  
[joh.cam.ac.uk/library](http://joh.cam.ac.uk/library)
2. Jubilee Library for Brighton and Hove City Council  
Completed 2005  
Architects: Bennetts Associates with Lomax Cassidy Edwards  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jubilee\\_Library,\\_Brighton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jubilee_Library,_Brighton)
3. New Library and refurbishment for The Queen's College, Oxford  
Completed 2017  
Architects: Rick Mather Architects (now MICA)  
[queens.ox.ac.uk/about-new-library](http://queens.ox.ac.uk/about-new-library)

## Biography

**Amanda Saville** recently retired from the post of Librarian of The Queen's College, Oxford. In her more than thirty year library career she has worked in national, academic and public libraries. Her professional expertise is centred on library buildings and she has been the library client for three major projects. She is always happy to talk to colleagues about any project they might be contemplating.