

Renovation, transformation, celebration: all change at the Bodleian Law Library, University of Oxford

One afternoon in November 2017, I found myself sitting at a long table with a group of architects, builders, administrators and estates staff, at a meeting to review the most recent phase in the refurbishment of our Grade II listed building. Not a typical day for me, but this meeting was the culmination of an extraordinary series of projects that had transformed a major academic law library from a 1960s paper-based collection into a 21st century research, teaching and learning hub geared to the needs of today's academics and students.

The Bodleian Law Library is in the St Cross building, which opened in 1964. Designed by Sir John Leslie Martin (architect of the Royal Festival Hall in London) and Colin St John Wilson (architect of the British Library) with a major contribution from Patrick Hodgkinson (principal architect of London's Brunswick Centre), its form is three interlocking cubes of different sizes, with a shared central area containing lecture theatres and rooms where the cubes overlap. Originally, there was a library in each cube (one each for Economics and Statistics, English and Law), and the Law Library's focus was, of course, on books.

When I joined the Law Library in December 2001, the building was structurally almost as it had been when it opened. The first major change came when the Economics and Statistics collections moved out of the St Cross Building and subsequently into the brand new Social

Sciences Library, which opened in 2004.¹ The Law Faculty expanded into the vacant space, creating a Harvard-style lecture theatre suitable for 'mooting' (a moot is a mock trial), and new administrative offices.² (The English Library was going to move into a new building too, but in 2008 general concerns about the world-wide financial crisis delayed the project, and as a result we still share the building). Notwithstanding that English was staying, the Law Faculty agreed, in co-operation with the English Faculty, to go ahead with a major project to reallocate space within the building more logically, and to bring the Law Faculty's research centres together under one roof ... and the space that was most readily available was in the Law Library!

No Library is likely to welcome giving up the space for about forty desks and twelve study carrels to other departments, but there were significant gains to be made, and the Library was fully engaged with the design of the project throughout. The architect, Malcolm McGregor from PRS (Pringle Richards Sharratt), became a familiar friendly face to all of us and he certainly did want us to be content with the architectural changes.

Before the refurbishment, we held well over half a million volumes on 16 kilometres of open access shelving. Our extensive collections cover over sixty jurisdictions, including the British Isles, Commonwealth and European countries, and the United States, and they are always

¹ <https://www.fosterandpartners.com/news/archive/2004/11/new-centre-for-the-advanced-study-of-the-social-sciences-opens-at-oxford-university/>

² <http://www.prsarchitects.com/projects/education/bodleian-law-library-english-law-faculties-st-cross-building-oxford-university>

expanding (only this summer, we received a donation of Mongolian legal material!). We have particular subject depth in legal philosophy, legal history, criminology, and international law, and our special collections include the University's Official Papers collection, managed by Hannah Chandler. 80 000 volumes were shelved on two floors in a wing to the west of the main reading room (our very own 'West Wing'!) which we gave up in exchange for space on the ground floor that was suitable for rolling cases: the refurbishment meant losing 35% of our shelving of which 20% was replaced by *Eco Space* rolling stacks; a net loss of 15%.

Ruth Bird, the Bodleian Law Librarian at the time, had some very hard decisions to make about what to retain in our on-site open-shelf collections and what to relegate to the Book Storage Facility at Swindon. In consultation with Faculty, we identified historic versions of legislation and some less frequently used material that was also available electronically. In the end, Helen Garner, the Information Resources Librarian in charge of collections, supervised the barcoding, boxing and labelling of some 1,200 linear metres of stock to be sent off-site. Every one of these volumes may now be ordered individually by readers and delivered for consultation within a day.

We remained open, with all Library staff on-site, throughout the building works, although for a six week-period we also provided a fetching service to the Social Sciences Library in the neighbouring building. This meant that the majority of our collections stayed in the St Cross Building, and moved around like jigsaw pieces. Some collections, such as the European Union Collections, moved two or even three times.

What have we lost and what have we gained? Well, the Library footprint is now smaller, but we still offer over three hundred desks, plus two IT rooms and over 20 private study spaces in carrels or bookable rooms. The arrangement of our collections is more logical and remains almost entirely open shelf, and they are better spaced, thanks to rolling cases and a more selective approach to what is kept on-site. We have gained a beautiful book-lined Library Seminar Room, highly popular discussion rooms with Skype facilities for readers (used by students from all over the University – not just the lawyers), and vastly improved staff offices. We succeeded in salvaging all the wooden shelving from the space that we lost, and re-installed it, replacing some hideous, if functional, metal shelves that had ruined the look and feel of the lower floors. There is now wheelchair access to all four floors, whereas previously the top floor, which held our United States, European and unrivalled international law collections was ‘off limits’ to anyone unable to use stairs unaided (for fire safety reasons: there was no ‘safe area’). Further, although it seemed a loss to give up some of our most attractive space in the Wing in exchange for more utilitarian space on the Ground floor, it turned out to be a huge gain this summer, as during the heatwave, the Library offered readers one of the coolest and pleasantest work areas in the building.

The biggest visible change, is the Library entrance (conveniently situated a stone’s throw from the Missing Bean Café, which is reputed to serve some of the best coffee in Oxford). Before the work, the first thing that readers saw on arrival was the back of the Enquiry Desk staff’s heads. We now have a beautiful open area to welcome the hundreds of academics, researchers, graduates and undergraduates that pour through our doors every term, and

they can see our faces! Once in the Library, readers find that our common law holdings have been reclassified to Moys, which is a huge improvement on the previous 'home grown' classification scheme. This was the icing on the cake at the end of the project, organised by Helen Garner (who is now our Bodleian Law Librarian), which enabled us to re-label and move 12 000 books between June and September 2017. The result is a fully browse-able array of monographs for the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States.

Is there anything that, with hindsight, we would do differently? At the review meeting in November last year, we all agreed that it had been a mistake to remain in occupation while the work was in progress. Despite dust sheets and screens, our collections needed cleaning at the end, and while it was difficult for builders to operate around a working Library, it was also almost impossible for us to operate around working builders. However, the decision to stay in the building was forced upon us by the speed of the timetable once the University committed to the project and gained all the necessary consents; quite aside from moving the collections, moving out would have meant relocating and possibly re-deploying the equivalent of about twenty-three full-time staff for the best part of year or more. Secondly, given a choice, I would never schedule the construction work for an academic Library refurbishment to impact on the new intake of students two years running, but that is what happened as a result of the September 2016 – December 2017 timetable. Costs were always an issue, carefully monitored throughout the project, and the third point on my personal retrospective 'wish list' is disappointment at the decision to take the roof works out of the project and fund them separately, with the result that they will not be addressed until 2019. This will be transformative, not only resolving long-standing problems with a flat

roof that can leak in sudden rain-storms, but also restoring the wonderful ventilation envisaged by the original architects, through roof lights that have seized up over the years.

As for the project itself, my advice to anyone embarking on a development of similar scale would be to future-proof the project management team by ensuring that every member has a fully briefed colleague who can replace them if they leave or retire. At our end-of-project review meeting, some of the most important players were missing, including the original project manager, the previous Bodleian Law Librarian and the previous English Faculty Librarian, all of whom had retired during the course of the refurbishment. Ensuring continuity and knowledge transfer is hugely difficult in a project of this length, particularly when all members of the project team are under pressure to keep up with their usual 'day jobs' throughout. Here in the Law Library we sorely felt the loss of Ruth Bird's galactic grasp of all the building issues when she retired, notwithstanding her detailed handover notes.

We continue actively to review our services and space provision, and are in the middle of a 'User Experience' project: academic law libraries have changed, and are continuing to change, in response to technical advances and developments in the way in which we deliver higher education. The Bodleian Law Library remains a focus for traditional legal scholars, and is visited by distinguished academics from all over the world. However, it is immensely exciting now to have the spaces in which offer one-to-one library tutorials, group teaching, or outreach sessions that combine paper-based resources with online ones. This summer alone, working in co-operation with the Law Faculty, we have welcomed readers ranging from sixth formers for bespoke information literacy classes, to advanced 'Masters' students

in Human Rights, for individual tutorials as they prepare for their dissertations. We are currently preparing to welcome over 600 new undergraduates and postgraduates to the Library for classes or induction, or our tailored 'book-a-librarian' service. They come here to read, study, write, and research, fully supported by professional law librarians, drawing upon our exceptional electronic and paper collections, in an environment that is now fit for purpose for the 21st century. A cause for celebration indeed.

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3 September 2018

(The views expressed in this article are the author's own, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Bodleian Law Library)