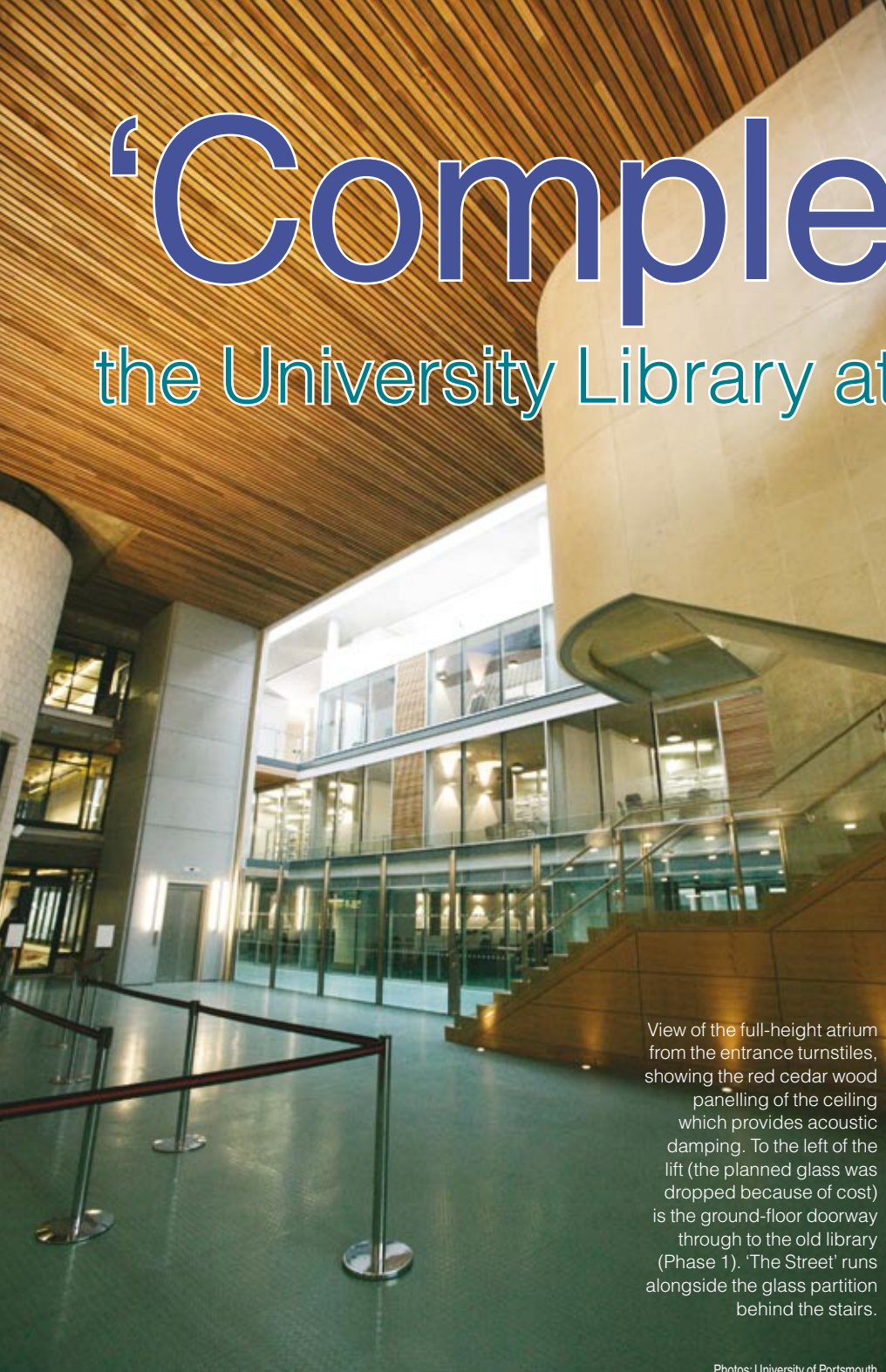


# 'Completing'

## the University Library at Portsmouth



View of the full-height atrium from the entrance turnstiles, showing the red cedar wood panelling of the ceiling which provides acoustic damping. To the left of the lift (the planned glass was dropped because of cost) is the ground-floor doorway through to the old library (Phase 1). 'The Street' runs alongside the glass partition behind the stairs.

Photos: University of Portsmouth

Like most universities, the University of Portsmouth has commissioned a number of new buildings in recent years. In part this wave of building reflects a need to update sometimes inadequate estates, but it has also been undertaken to receive an intake of students paying substantially more in fees and ready to take their money to institutions whose facilities meet the resultant raised expectations. Portsmouth has had new academic buildings and halls of residence, and in January 2007 the university invited the novelist P. D. James to unveil its new library extension. This is a long overdue development in view of the more than doubling of the student body since the original building was completed back in 1977.

### Architects of repute

The University of Portsmouth is fortunate in that, since the 1970s, all of its library accommodation has been purpose-built by architects of repute.

The original library of the former Portsmouth Polytechnic was opened in the university's Ravelin Park by Lady Frewen, wife of Admiral Frewen after whom it was named. Like Phase 2, which opened in 1988, the original building was by Ahrends, Burton & Koralek, whose proposed extension to the National Gallery was later to be denounced by Prince Charles as 'a carbuncle on the face of a much-loved friend'. The Frewen received no such brickbats and indeed both Phase 1 and 2 won a number of awards. Thompson<sup>1</sup> describes it as 'exciting, perhaps inspiring'. Phase 1 was to have been part of a grand plan for the university<sup>2</sup> which would have seen ziggurat-style residences and teaching blocks (not unlike the Lasdun terraces at the University of East Anglia) occupying much of the park. Although this was never realised due to spending cutbacks, Frewen 1 can be seen to reflect the intended style in its terraced appearance. Although visually exciting, especially at night, this design created practical problems for a working library, including inflexible spaces, noise and heat gain. Phase 2 was a much more practical but less interesting cube – though the ground-floor issue desk area had a stylish curved window. Phases 1 and 2 were described in some detail in a range of articles in the architectural press.<sup>3,4</sup>

### 'Phase 3'

The design of Phase 3 was put out to a RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) design competition, and eventually Penyore & Prasad was selected from a shortlist of five. The brief was to design a building which would fit in with the architecture of Phase 1

Attractive library buildings are essential to meet the raised expectations of today's students, **Timothy Collinson** stresses. The University of Portsmouth's new extension features a sedum roof, and 'The Street', a corridor running right through the building.



and Phase 2, expanding in a coherent way so that:

- the three-floor subject approach could continue in the enlarged building
- the zoning of activities would control noise
- it provided for an enlarged entrance area with improved reception and security areas
- the library would continue to operate with minimal disruption while the work was carried out.

It was also designed to form an attractive façade on the approach roads to the library, such as the view along Burnaby Road. From the park side, 'battered' walls and a zig-zagged shape reminiscent of a ravelin recall the Napoleonic fortifications that once stood on the eponymous park.

'Designed to achieve a Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (Breeam) rating of Very Good, the building minimises energy use and its environmental impact. Examples include using materials that will help maintain stable internal temperatures without the need for air conditioning, collecting rainwater to flush toilets and ensuring good design maximises the opportunities for good daylight while minimising solar gain. User comfort has been paramount in the design to ensure that the building is a healthy place to study and work, with none of the stuffiness so often associated with libraries.'<sup>5</sup>

Funding for the £11m project – which includes VAT and architects' fees – came from a £4m HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) grant and the remainder from university resources. Remarkably, the building came in on budget.

The building work was, however, delayed initially by the exigencies of the design competition. Further construction delays meant the original plan to open at the beginning of the 2006/07 year wasn't achieved. Finally, just before Christmas the building was handed over. The beginning of the new year saw the tremendous labour of moving large quantities of stock, and students were able to use the

'battered' walls and a zig-zagged shape reminiscent of a ravelin recall Napoleonic fortifications.



new extension from the beginning of 2007.

One change that perhaps hadn't been expected was the decision the university took to rename the library building. No longer the Frewen Library, the entire building and all three phases would now be called simply the University Library. Formerly there had been a number of departmental libraries which required differentiation. Now with the amalgamation of all the branches it was thought to be more useful and more important to 'brand the university as a centre of learning', and 'having a distinctive "University Library" visible to the city would be a major part of that'.<sup>6</sup> Dove<sup>7</sup> makes just this point: 'Design

offers libraries one of their greatest marketing opportunities.' The extent to which there is greater awareness in the city of the university as a result of this and, on the other hand, how much this represented a perceived loss of identity to library staff would perhaps be an interesting subject of further study.

#### The new extension

The new extension has various features of note, from the spacious atrium linking through to the older parts of the library, (see photo, p. 44) the double-height second floor, the sedum roof on the single-storey pooled teaching space, and 'The Street' – a corridor running right





The brief [was to provide] an enlarged entrance area with improved reception and security areas.





Left: One of six group study rooms – a booking system manages demand.

Above: double-height second-floor of the extension, housing history and literature. Slits in the ceiling let in light but are angled northwards. On the right is a series of desks with four seats at which students can plug in laptops – one of the 'social' zones.

through the building, with glass on both sides. The library now comprises a building of just under 10,000 sq m.

Entering from the Cambridge Road plaza, the foyer leads to toilets, the library, a café, the computer suite and The Street. The computer suite houses some 180 computers and has helpdesk support throughout the day (see photo, p.45). This has been hugely popular with the students, who had been feeling the lack of on-site computing facilities for much of the building process. It is about three times the size of what was previously offered and doesn't include the 62 computers (29 'database' machines, 30 Opacs, and three Accessibility Area computers) within the library proper, nor the 20 laptops available for loan.

The Street leads through the building to Ravelin Park on the other side of the main entrance. Towards the end there is access to Foundation Direct and the pooled teaching space. Foundation Direct is one of the university's CETLs (Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning) funded by HEFCE and supporting students on foundation degrees.<sup>8</sup> There's a drop-in centre, office space, and well-appointed seminar rooms. The pooled teaching space consists of one classroom for 40 students and five classrooms for 20 students, all kitted out with the standard university installation of projectors, PC, DVD players, visualisers, etc.

Back in the foyer, and going through into the library proper, you go past the reception desk, security gates and past the loans/returns desk. The atrium is a full-height space (three storeys) which shares some characteristics of the German library design which Wilson<sup>9</sup> describes as featuring 'well-marked entrances, large atria giving a view of the different operational zones, use of natural light (with corresponding measures to protect against heat and glare) and

positioning of most of the seating on the periphery'. The atrium provides access to the photocopy room and Short Loan Collection, the older part of the library (Phases 1 and 2), as well as a lift and stairs to all floors of the new extension.

The first floor of the extension has been used to house the Special Collections formerly on the first floor (European Documentation Centre, Law Reference, Parliamentary Papers, and Statistics). The second floor, which is double-height, giving a light and airy feel, has taken on the overflow of the literature and history book stock (see photo, above). Both floors are distinctively finished in fair-faced concrete. Both floors have study space around the outside edges and group work rooms overlooking the atrium. Initially, the plan had been to make these freely available but their popularity proved such that a booking scheme had to be introduced immediately to manage the demand.

With the additional space that the extension provided came the opportunity to use the facilities slightly differently. Students have long chafed under traditional library restrictions of silence and fasting, and the library staff wanted to cater for the differing study styles of today's students. After consultations with staff and students, the library introduced a zoning policy with three different types of areas: silent, quiet and social. In the silent areas no conversations, no laptops and no texting are allowed; in the quiet areas whispered conversations are allowed but no mobile phone conversations; and in the social zones (not 'noisy' as some wags suggest) students can work together, have mobile phone conversations and, most controversially, bring in cold food. This has been a success, with students using each of the zones correctly, although there have been suggestions that a 'silent but allowing laptops' zone would be useful. The policy has also reduced pressure on library staff to enforce strict regulations throughout the building.

#### Opening

The official opening took place on 31 January 2007. P. D. James – an honorary graduate of

the university – was invited to do the honours and made a speech that would warm the cockles of any librarian's heart. She admitted 'for me the library is at the heart of any institution of learning, and particularly a university. Here we have assembled the wisdom of the past, the achievements of the present and our aspirations for the future'.<sup>10</sup>

In conjunction with the new building and, indeed, a revamp of the university web pages, the library website<sup>11</sup> is undergoing a makeover. Our aim is to make entry to electronic resources feel as spacious as the library's new physical entrance.

And, of course, the new library has been promoted internally to staff and students, with tours; a brochure on the design of the extension, the history of the library and its collections and services (produced by two members of library staff in conjunction with the marketing department); presentations in various faculty venues; and write-ups in other university publications and newsletters. The opening was also picked up by the Portsmouth press and made *The News*.<sup>12</sup>

#### The future

Will there ever be a 'Phase 4'? With growing electronic resources just how much need is there for further physical space? Snowley,<sup>13</sup> writing about a project that needed to allow space for growth, added 'although I am certain that the trend towards electronic journals will slow down the rate of growth, I'm equally certain that the library will remain a collection of printed volumes for many years to come'. The new extension was built a little larger than might be justified, as the university was conscious of building in some amount of future proofing. And, in the words of the Vice-Chancellor, it was felt that Phase 3 was 'completing the library'. ☺

*Timothy Collinson (timothy.collinson@port.ac.uk) is Faculty Librarian, University of Portsmouth.*

References for this feature can be viewed at [www.cilip.org.uk/publications/updatesmagazine](http://www.cilip.org.uk/publications/updatesmagazine)