Old Buildings New Spaces

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OLD BUILDINGS NEW SPACES: HOW TO ORGANIZE AN ACADEMIC LIBRARY IN AN ANCIENT BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

This project arises from the need to conform to safety regulations four spaces very different from each other: the Social Sciences Periodicals Library, the Geography Department Library, the Geography Museum, and - for the next five to seven years - the Library of Economics. The library should in fact be transferred in the building of the Department of Economics, now under Restoration. These libraries are set in adjoining historical buildings from the 17th and 18th centuries, overlooking one of the oldest streets in Padova.

The safety requirements called for a radical rethinking of library space arrangement, which has to match the needs of different types of public, and the relationship with the new little Geography Museum. In order to satisfy the needs of a diverse audience, the space has been rearranged with an approach similar to that found in public libraries, and adjusted according to different users' needs. Every space is flexible thanks to adaptable furniture, and the reading rooms can be used for workshops, lectures and exhibitions.

The aim of this project is to meet the different needs of the audience (scholars, students and school kids) in a safe environment, adding value to the historical buildings where such spaces are situated.

Keywords: LIBRARY SPACES, HISTORIC BUILDINGS, SAFETY REQUIREMENTS, FLEXIBLE SPACE, PATRON'S CHANGING NEEDS, DESIGN THINKING

INTRODUCTION

This project arises from the need to conform to safety regulations four spaces very different from each other: the Social Sciences Periodicals Library, the Geography Department Library, the Geography Museum, and the Library of Economics of the University of Padova, in Italy.

These were all hosted in historic buildings and when dealing with historic buildings it is often difficult to resolve the conflicts that arise between their conformation and the requirements of health and safety legislation.

Our historic buildings had relevant problems:

-as the majority of historic buildings they had works carried out and services installed when the use of asbestos was common practice. Nowadays, there is a requirement on all building owners to identify any asbestos contained within their building and remove them.

-due to safety needs we had to joint two buildings creating a door and an escape route

and, of course,

-to install a fire escape for both the buildings

Moreover, there was the need to joint these four different spaces for management needs: lack of librarians and extension of opening hours.
The safety requirements called for a radical rethinking of library space arrangement, which had to match the needs of different types of public, (academics, scholars, students and school kids) in a safe environment, adding value to the historical buildings where such spaces are situated.

We tried to create a learning space where students can find inspiration, a space which can satisfy everyone’s study habits, a space where conversation, collaboration and informal learning, but also concentration and study in solitude are facilitated. It is a flexible space with movable furnishing to support the changing needs of users and to host seminars and meetings.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

These libraries are set in two adjoining historical buildings from the 17th and 19th centuries, overlooking one of the oldest streets in Padova. The first one, Palazzo Ca' Borin, built during the 17th century, has large rooms with Venetian marble floor, walls finished with stucco and paintings, high ceilings and a decorated fireplace. The other one, Palazzo Wollenborg, was built at the beginning of the 19th century and its rooms have frescos and stucco on the ceilings and polychrome windows made at the beginning of the 20th century.

![Fig.1 Via Del Santo](image)

Originally these four spaces had very different purposes:

**The Social Sciences Periodicals Library** took up two floors of Palazzo Ca’ Borin (900 square metres, 48 seats, 14 informal seats and 30 computers). It was born in 2009 in order to meet changes in student expectations and meet the rising demand for more and better study space. For this purpose, during the former year, we used the focus group technique, a method for gathering qualitative data to help us understand how students use the library, identify student needs and make decisions about allocation of resources and the provision of services to support student learning.

We also analyzed the data of the annual survey of the libraries of the University of Padova and the AlmaLaurea data, that is the reliable data of the inter-university consortium AlmaLaurea on graduate students, in order to check the satisfaction and verify the percentage of working students and off-site students with particular needs.

These are the key areas identified from the analysis of the comments received:
- Quantity and quality of study settings
- Availability of silent study spaces but also of group study spaces
- Availability of computers
- Opening hours

The library had to host all the periodical volumes of the Library of Economics and the Library of Social Sciences (above 600 titles) and the books and journals of the European Documentation Centre. In order to answer the students’ expectations, a great percentage of volumes were
relocated to storage archives off-site, in the nearby of Padova, preferring the electronic format and increasing seat provision both formal and informal.

We bought flexible study facilities that can adapt to cyclic demand for space and can make space for conferences and seminars, but also suitable to the magnificently restored rooms. Opening hours were extended from 9 a.m. till 11 p.m., during the week, and on Saturdays and Sundays from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

![Fig.2 Emeroteca Ca’ Borin](image)

**The Library of Geography**, a Department library, took up two floors of the adjoining Palazzo Wollenborg (500 square metres, 35 seats, 15,000 books, 50,000 maps and 58 journals). In this building there was the asbestos to be removed and precious wood floors to restore. Its users were mainly academics and not many students. Books, atlas and maps were located in closed shelves, basically for security reasons, because the storehouse was not safe. Due to the preciousness and the peculiarity of the items, the services were customized and the opening hours were not so large.

![Fig.3 Former Library of Geography](image)

**The Geography Museum** plays an important role in the educational activities for primary schools and is one of the scientific museums of the city of Padova. It was born with the purpose of keeping together all the items gathered in more than 140 years of research. The aim is to
renew the relationship between the university and the civil society, the universities’ third mission.

The Library of Economics is a Department library, attended by academics and students, with almost 30,000 books on open shelf, computers for the students. It was located in a building facing the new library with poor environmental conditions, not equipped for modern ways of working (for example power outlets). Its journals were already located in the Social Sciences Periodical Library. There was the need to move it temporarily from the former building to the new one, while a brand new location is under restoration.

THE NEW LIBRARY

This was the situation before the union of these services.

We decided to see problems as opportunities and to start looking for transformative solutions, using the imaginative approach of the design thinking. The design thinking helps improving libraries through creative problem-solving. The idea is to use techniques to come out of familiar ways of thinking and generate creative solutions. The end goal is always to see things from a different perspective, usually the patrons’ one.

Once again, we analyzed the data of the libraries’ annual satisfaction survey and tried to meet users’ expectations in terms of the quality of the physical environment and the expected facilities.
For this purpose the space has been rearranged with an approach similar to that of public libraries, and adjusted according to the different users’ needs.

![Fig.6 The new library](image)

At the same time we had to consider the structural constraints of the historical buildings, but also to try adding value to them.

Here are our solutions:

- The space arrangement supports the buildings’ use in the most appropriate way: ancient halls are intended for individual and silent study, while the spaces between the buildings offer small “havens of rest” to those who might want to take a break. Students can choose the most appropriate space based on their needs: for studying in silence or getting inspired, for group work or exchanging ideas (learning commons).

![Fig.7 Different study spaces](image)

- The ground floor, where there are no rooms of value, houses books and periodicals in open shelves.

- Spaces are mostly dedicated to the users. The 70% of the periodicals are e-only and the purchase of e-books has increased. Both issues of periodicals from previous years and rarely consulted books have been moved in a far away repository.

- Primary school kids have at their disposal both educational workshops and the museum as well as the library in order to run a search or go on a treasure hunt.
There is a precious room, with a fine and fragile floor, which is reserved for academics, PhD students and visiting professors.

Every space is flexible thanks to adaptable furniture, and the reading rooms can be used for workshops, lectures and exhibitions which attract an heterogeneous public and make the library more lively.

All spaces have wired and wireless connections and have computer facilities. In order to soften the inevitable noise, we installed acoustic panels where possible.
• The Library of Economics has been placed in this building temporarily (for 5/7 years) because its definite location is waiting to be renovated. Therefore, it was necessary to organize the collections in order to integrate them in the library, but still in a temporary way. They were arranged according to the DDC (Dewey Decimal Classification), since this type of classification allows to keep the Economics (300) and Geography (900) collections separate. They are also separated naturally, due to the arrangement of the rooms. This arrangement will make it easier to move the library to its new location in the future.

• For a better use of the spaces, reading and consultation rooms are set in the main floor (piano nobile), while in the ground floor and mezzanine there is the archive and and the special collections: the Library of Geography has a great collection of over 50,000 ancient and modern maps placed in a dedicated room in the middle floor of Palazzo Wollenborg, together with the digitization lab. The mezzanine hosts also the atlas collection and some tables for the group study and a small place where to relax.

PROS AND CONS
The difficulties we faced and are still facing are many. As always there are pros and cons:

• The historic buildings offer beautiful and inspiring spaces, but, at the same time, the environment conditions create practical problems such as the lack of lightness due to the high ceilings and historic chandeliers, or the cost for heating or refreshing of so large rooms.
• Due to the structural constraints, the librarians’ offices are distant from each other, but, at the same time, this fact ensures a widespread presence of librarians.
• The beauty of the reading rooms attract many users, the union of four services gives liveliness and high attendance, but during the exam session the spaces are overcrowded. At the same time there is less need of staff and it is possible to have extended timetables.

THE FUTURE
And what about the future?

Our aim is to improve the library facilities. To do so we intend to:

• move to a remote storehouse much more physical volumes and to prefer electronic format in order to free up space for collaborative learning and other activities
• obtain a space for the patrons to relax and have a coffee
• equip an outdoor space as a reading garden

CONCLUSION
It requested a great effort from all the colleagues and the architect, who worked side by side, to make a single structure from two buildings and four different services. We didn’t want to create the perfect library, we looked for possible and practicable solutions and changed the original project according to the feasibility and the needs of the students and professors. And this is the way we intend to act also in the future.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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