

Redeveloping the World's largest Social Science Library for the 21st Century

By JEAN SYKES

THE START OF THE AFFAIR

The complete redevelopment of the LSE's library, built in 1916 as a book warehouse and purchased by [LSE](#) in 1978, was first discussed in the early 1990s. By this time it had become clear that the library needed major changes to make it fit for the future. The environmental conditions were poor for the valuable print collections (too hot and too dry) and for the users (stuffy and cramped). The layout was confusing, making it difficult for people to find their way round: a large internal 'light well' from the first floor upwards caused problems of circulation, inefficiency of space use, and did not actually cast much light into the building at all. And the infrastructure of the building was not suitable for the huge growth in use of computers, with the result that ugly bolt-on wiring had been employed in certain parts of the library to accommodate 150 PCs, with very little flexibility for further expansion.

In 1994 architects Foster and Partners were asked to conduct feasibility study for the transformation of the building into a modern 21st century library with appropriate environmental controls for the four million printed items and a flexible IT infrastructure to accommodate the growth in use of computers. The plan needed to offer optimum study space and facilities for users too. The imaginative redesign, with a Foster 'signature' central atrium with stepped spiral ramp and a glass dome at the top, captured the imagination and the School began to raise funds for the work. The fund-raising department in the LSE launched a major campaign and for the next five years Foster's table-top model and futuristic slides were used to give presentation after presentation to potential donors. The School's famous director, Professor Anthony Giddens, threw his weight behind the scheme and the library is indebted to him for the enthusiasm and energy with which he supported the redevelopment. The UK's Heritage Lottery Fund ([HLF](#)) was approached for a large sum of money, and two competitive submissions were made in consecutive years to the Higher Education Funding Council for England ([HEFCE](#)) against their call for bids for 'poor estates', that is buildings in bad condition. These approaches were successful, and having the support of the HLF in particular was very helpful in persuading other donors, both individuals and charitable trusts, to put their money behind the project. The HLF are known to have very strict standards, to scrutinise projects very carefully, and to fund initiatives only if they are convinced that there is a true UK heritage value in doing so. A few donors gave significant sums of money, a trust made a 'matching funding' offer whereby it promised a very large amount if the School could raise a certain sum from its governors and alumni (we did and we got the matching funds), and a number of smaller trusts and charities gave considerable sums.

THE 'GO-AHEAD'

In the summer of 1998 enough funds or promises of funds had been secured for the School to take the risk and go ahead with the project. There was still a considerable shortfall in the funding needed to do the work, but two factors influenced the decision: one, it is well known that fund-raising can be very successful once building work has started and potential donors can visit the site, have a 'hard hat' tour, and speak to the architects and constructors; and two, the grants offered by the HLF and HEFCE had to be spent within a certain timescale, and to wait any longer would mean giving up these grants and starting all over again. Foster and Partners were appointed as architects, an independent project manager was brought in, and detailed planning began. A top-level steering group was set up to direct the programme and keep a strong watch on the finance, and the Librarian was a member of this group. A planning group was established under the leadership of the Deputy Librarian and had representatives of various divisions of the library, IT Services, academic staff, and students on it. The planning group met weekly with the architects and project manager to work on every detail of the redevelopment, and spawned a large number of sub-groups to work on specific issues (space planning for the bookstock, the study areas, the service counters, the IT provision, photocopying services, special services, staff areas, and so on). A member of the planning group chaired each sub-group and between them the groups involved a large proportion of the library's 80 staff.

TWO PROJECTS

In fact, there were two projects, which required meticulous planning: one was the redevelopment of the library itself, and the other was the move of the entire contents to temporary premises. The strong advice from the project manager had been that the work could not be done without complete evacuation of the building. A search began immediately for a suitable building within easy walking distance of the campus, not a simple task in such a crowded (and expensive) part of central London and given the space required for these enormous social science collections. It was soon realised that the chances of finding one suitable, affordable, large building nearby would be slim, and so the possibility of splitting the library across two or more buildings became a probability. While the LSE's Estates staff searched for buildings, the planning group's work on space calculations for the various aspects of the library (study areas, bookstock, IT facilities, staff areas, etc) was now going to be vital not just for the redesign of the existing building but for the requirements and layout of any temporary buildings that might be found. The move out became colloquially known as the 'decant', and it gave the planning group twice the work and twice the headaches. The construction work would take eighteen months. The move out was planned for June to September 1999 and the return for March to May 2001.

INVOLVING THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

The LSE is a social science institution and the library plays a crucial part in the teaching, learning and research activities of its staff and students: it is 'the laboratory of the social sciences'. Moreover, the high standards of scholarship in the School, together with the wealth of the library's collections, combined to make it one of the most heavily used university libraries in the country. About half of the students at LSE are studying on intensive one-year Masters courses, and therefore the move out, the decant service, and the move back would affect two cohorts of postgraduate students, and for the class of 1999/2000 the temporary service would be the only library the students would experience. For one cohort of undergraduates on three-year courses there would be three libraries to familiarise themselves with: the original old library in 1998/99, the temporary one in 1999/2000, and the completely redeveloped one in 2000/2001, plus two moves to survive. Small wonder that there was significant nervousness on the part of academic departments and students about this library project. During autumn 1998 and spring 1999, therefore, the library and senior management of the LSE mounted a major campaign of communication and consultation right across the School in order to calm people's fears and explain in some detail how the planning was being done. The plans were discussed as they unfolded at a number of major committees, and a small number of members of the planning group went round to consult every academic department (of which there are 19), show the plans and discuss proposals, and listen to their comments and requests in minute detail. This process was repeated to share the final plans with departments, to explain constraints, agree service parameters during the decant period, and manage user expectations. All library staff were involved in the communication policy and after the second round of consultations a final plan for the move out and temporary service was made publicly available.

THE MOVE OUT

By spring 1999 two buildings had been found for the decant. By a near-miracle, one was a large building which, although not perfect, had been used as a library: it was the British Library's Science Reference Library and its collections were about to be moved into the British Library's new St Pancras building. This building, called Southampton Buildings was only seven minutes' walk from the LSE campus (we had pledged that students would not have more than a ten-minute walk), and it could house about 70% of our collections. The other building was a warehouse some distance away, and it was agreed that the remaining 30% of the books and periodicals (we would select less heavily used stock) would move there and a van fetch service would be established to bring requested volumes to the other site for users. Now the planning group had three buildings to plan for: the redesign, the old BL building, and the offsite store. A considerable

amount of enabling work, particularly to install IT wiring, was needed in Southampton Buildings before the move in there could start. Funding for additional library staff was agreed by the School during the eighteen-month decant. This was needed to overcome the difficulties in Southampton Buildings, including awkward old-fashioned layout requiring extra re-shelving staff and the need to split course collection from main collection on different floors and staff two service counters instead of one; to operate a fetching, photocopying, and re-shelving service at the offsite store; and to staff an enquiry and fetching service for disabled users from a small room on campus because Southampton Buildings could not cater for wheelchairs. Besides, a van had to be bought and a driver hired to operate a twice-daily fetch service from the offsite store. It is a tribute to the skills and dedication of the many members of the library staff who participated in the planning process that this seemingly impossible task was carried out successfully. Senior librarians gave of their time most generously. Only one member of staff, the person who did all the detailed bookstock planning for the three buildings, was relieved of normal workload for six months before the move out and a further six months before the return; others willingly worked long hours on a weekly basis, with no respite from their normal tasks. The book move took fourteen weeks, between June and September 1999, with the removal company unusually agreeing to work two shifts a day (between 6 am and 2 pm and between 2 pm and 10 pm) supervised by library staff. Throughout the entire move the library remained open to users and offered a full service. To help people to plan their use of books, a detailed list of the books that would be moved each day was posted up in the library and on the website, and the normal limit on the number of books a student could borrow were relaxed to allow them to take out as many books as they liked. The old library was completely open to users except for the immediate part of the bookstock that was being moved that day. If anyone wanted a book that had already moved to Southampton Buildings, it was fetched back for them. In September the old library was closed and the builders moved in, and for eighteen months the LSE library offered its full services from Southampton Buildings. In the meantime, the weekly meetings with the architects continued to plan the detailed layout of the redesign, including selecting furnishings and finishes; the fund-raising activities accelerated; and the steering group met monthly to cope with all the building and financial problems that can be expected in a project of this kind and size.

THE REDEVELOPMENT

The objectives of the redesign had already been explicitly described for the feasibility study and the fund-raising campaign, and can be summed up as one aim: to fit the LSE library for the 21st century. The print collection is estimated to be the most comprehensive set of social science materials anywhere in the world, and covers a truly global spectrum. The archives and rare books collection is extensive and well-known, and the main collection includes an incomparable wealth of official government publications and historical statistics from all over the world. The library is particularly rich in 19th and 20th century print resources. Over 15,000 external researchers use the library each year, double the size of the LSE's own student population. Yet the environmental conditions in the building were poor and were threatening to destroy valuable print resources (especially the 19th century materials). To maintain the historical print collections safely for use by future generations of researchers required major remedial action. Users too were disadvantaged; both by a stuffy and unpleasant study environment, and by a physical layout, which made it extremely difficult to orient oneself round the stacks. As well as being a historical library of major repute, the LSE library had during the 1990s developed its IT resources to a very high degree, making use of new technology to bring a far richer set of resources to the user's desktop. To cater for the anticipated increase in electronic information sources and resources, a radical remedy would be needed: the building had to have an inbuilt resilient IT infrastructure to offer maximum flexibility for expansion of desktop PCs and plug-in laptop facilities. And finally, in order to ensure space for continued expansion of print collections, the whole design of the library needed changing to create much better space efficiency. So the new library, its collections, its study areas, and its IT facilities would create a building fit for the 21st century.

THE MOVE BACK

Not surprisingly with a project of this kind, there were a number of delays during the construction work, which threatened to affect the timescale for moving back. But the LSE was up against some very hard factors. The total cost of the redevelopment went up considerably when some major defects were found in

the infrastructure of the original building's ceilings, and the same problem caused a delay in the programme's timescale. Renting Southampton Buildings and the offsite store was costing a large sum of money per month and it was going to be important not to have to prolong the length of the decant period for this reason. Halfway through the eighteen-month period Southampton Buildings was sold and the new owner did not want the library to stay there longer than had been originally planned. The move back was planned for March to May 2001, and that was perilously close to exam-time. To delay the move and risk being in the middle of exams was unthinkable for the sake of the students, and to wait to move until after exams were finished at the end of June was unthinkable financially and would not be accepted by the new owner of Southampton Buildings. So some brave decisions were taken. First, it was decided to save money on rent and transport costs by moving the 30% of the bookstock out of the offsite store and into the redeveloped library in January/February 2001. The building was not finished and could not be accessed by users; library staff and removal men moved the books in while electricians, carpenters, plasterers and plumbers worked all around them. And any books required by a user were now fetched from the redeveloped building to Southampton Buildings. The main book move started in March and the course collection was moved during the long Easter weekend closure in order to cause minimum disruption to students. Halfway through the move, when the building was only just ready for habitation, the main library operation switched from Southampton Buildings to the 'new' library on campus; henceforth any books required from the former were fetched to the latter instead of vice versa. Once again, the entire move was done without closing the library and without reducing the service. It is possible that the two moves of four million books within the space of eighteen months is without equal in the annals of library moves. And to undertake this project without closing the library to users must surely be unique.

TEETHING PROBLEMS

There were many problems along the way, and for the students who lived through it there were frustrations. It was particularly hard on the students finishing their courses in 2001, because the move back required them to familiarise themselves with a completely new library layout just a few weeks before their final exams. The move was effected really before the building was 100% ready, and that meant that the list of remedial work (or 'snagging') was enormous. From simple things like tightening door handles and finishing off painting some doors and walls, to major problems like calibrating the two glass lifts (they kept breaking down in the first few weeks) and getting the turnstiles to work properly, the problems just kept coming. We are still finishing off some remedial work nearly three years after the move back. One of the worst problems has been the toilets. Not only are there not enough of them for the use the building receives, but also there have been constant problems of leaking, breakdown and blockages. The School has now agreed to add more toilets this summer, and the plumbing problems are being slowly put right. Another area, which did not work well, is the lobby area near the entrance. This was designed as a relaxing seating area where students were expected to meet and sit and chat. However, from day one the students used this place as an unauthorised eating and drinking area, with the result that the carpet and soft furnishings quickly became shabby and stained with coffee and soft drinks. A generous donation from the LSE's new Family and Friends Association has recently allowed us to redevelop the lobby entirely and in January 2004 this area was unveiled as a high-tech internet café type space, with wipe-clean floor and surfaces and a state of the art 'pod' with flat screen PCs built into it (one at wheelchair height). A large plasma screen shows rolling information about events at the School and an update every five minutes on the real-time availability of PCs across the campus, so that students never need to queue for a PC and can always find out easily where there are PCs not currently being used. The redeveloped lobby is a great success and students are welcome to eat and drink and search the Internet in a space that is now perfectly adapted to this type of use.

THE REDEVELOPMENT WAS A SUCCESS FROM THE START

Despite the teething problems, the redevelopment of the library was an immediate success. Library staff quickly settled in and became familiar with the new layout, and they appreciated the major improvements, which allowed them to give a much better service to users. In the first year of operation the use of the library by students doubled, and every year since all measures of use have continued to grow disproportionately to any increases in student numbers. Book loans are now rising by an average of 7% per year and entries

through the turnstiles by 4%. It is a wonderful building, and has attracted visits from all over the UK and the world from librarians and architects. It was featured on BBC radio and television in September 2001, and in the same month took part in the London 'Open House' programme whereby famous private buildings are opened to the public on one weekend of the year and attracted five thousand visitors, was officially opened by the Princess Royal in November 2001, and won a City of Westminster Civic Trust Award in 2002. The library is one of the most photographed buildings in London, and the spectacular spiral ramp in particular has featured in many library journals and has earned the library a number of fees from commercial firms wishing to use the ramp photos in their company brochures.

FEATURES OF THE REDEVELOPMENT

The library covers five floors and 15,000 square metres of space. The redesign created only an 8% total increase in space but the *space efficiency* was increased by much more because of the new physical layout. The main design feature, as well as being the central circulation space, is a huge central atrium with a spiral stepped ramp and two glass lifts, with a glazed north-facing dome at the top. The ground floor has been largely cut away to create a double-height lower ground floor. Computer-controlled natural ventilation through segments of the glass dome is energy-efficient, and so is the presence-detecting lighting, which lights only the areas that are in use. Staff offices are arranged in a vertical stack with a goods lift and loading bay for deliveries, and this is the only sector of the building that is not open to users. The rest is arranged largely in an open plan design with very few internal walls. Much more of the space is for users than before, with library staff areas occupying 18% less space than before, and 95% of the library's collections are now on open access. There are 1600 study spaces including 500 IT spaces (where before there were 150) and 226 laptop points. The ground floor has a reception desk, service counter, course collection, copy shop, large study area and PC facilities. The lower ground floor houses the archives reading room and collections, over 200 PCs, an IT help desk, and a large collection of print resources on open access mobile storage for maximum space efficiency. The first floor has an information desk and about 20 PCs for visitors. Floors one, two and three have a combination, based on a similar pattern on each floor for familiarity and ease of orientation, of bookstack, IT spaces, and quiet study areas. The library also shares part of the fourth floor with a number of LSE research centres: a gallery around the central atrium contains study spaces, which can be used by all LSE research students. There are 50 kilometres of shelving in the library altogether, and the siting of bookstacks on each floor in a circle around the central circulation space means that the quiet study areas, which are placed all around the perimeter of the building benefiting from the natural light of the windows, are protected from the noisier central parts by the books. Other facilities include fourteen group study rooms, equipped with whiteboards, power points and data points, which are bookable by students. Two of them are specially equipped for students with disabilities. There are two IT training suites on the lower ground floor which are used by library and IT Services staff to give group training sessions on the use of library electronic resources and a wide range of software applications for courses. Signage is minimal but effective and the furniture and fittings are in neutral colours (light wood tables, pale white metal shelving, grey chairs, chrome fittings, and grey carpet with flecks of dark blue. The colour in the library comes from the books and the users themselves, and the use of minimalist colours and finishes throughout the library means that the eye is drawn to the shapes and spaces more than anything else. From any vantage point - lower ground floor looking up, glass lifts, ramp as you walk up or down, or any point on any floor there are vistas across the whole building with most attractive shapes and lines and curves.

A FINAL WORD

Perhaps our users should have the last word. Here are some quotations from them:

'First rate... I use the library about twice as often as before.'

'It not only looks terrific but it is also very well organised and user friendly.'

'A wonderful energy efficient space.'

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

HEFCE - Higher Education Funding Council for England. <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/>

HLF - Heritage Lottery Fund. <http://www.hlf.org.uk/>

LSE - London School of Economics and Political Science. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/>