Protolib: rethinking library spaces at Cambridge, 2015-present

Why was the project needed? Previous research conducted by the University Library, including diary studies and contextual interviews with students, highlighted a need to think more analytically and systematically about users' experience of study spaces at Cambridge. Traditional library spaces were provided in abundance, but were not fully supporting the current needs and activities of their users. People have different needs and preferences and it became clear that providing a range of study spaces with different facilities, features and atmospheres would improve users' overall experience of Cambridge libraries. It was decided that this aspect of library services would be explored further in the Protolib project.

How was the project run? Protolib and its successor Protolib II were part of the Futurelib programme, a collaboration between staff at various Cambridge libraries that is based at and funded by the University Library. Futurelib researches the habits and needs of Cambridge University's students, researchers and academics, and uses these research findings to design and deliver improved, user-centred library services. For the Protolib studies, Futurelib staff worked with the design and innovation consultancy Modern Human.

Protolib and Protolib II took an evidence-based approach to the improvement of library spaces. The team conducted extensive ethnographic research into the study habits and preferences of library users and used their initial findings to prototype improvements to library and social spaces at the University Library (**pictured above right**), the English Faculty and the Law Faculty. Their research methods included diary studies, focus groups, close observation of people using the prototype spaces and contextual interviews with users as they left the spaces. Feedback was also gathered through the use of questionnaires, comment cards and sticky note feedback walls which were placed in each of the prototype environments.

What was achieved? The research findings were integrated with the results of the prototype studies to produce a set of guiding principles and recommendations for the optimisation of study space provision in Cambridge. These principles include the following:

1) Users expect to use a variety of library and non-library spaces to meet their study needs and will move freely between them. These study spaces can be imagined on a geographical model of three 'hubs' where study space is abundant (West Cambridge, the centre of town, and the Sidgwick Site), each surrounded by a 'halo' where study space is less abundant and University buildings and facilities are less concentrated. The 'hubs and halos' model suggests that, from the point of view of optimizing study spaces, each geographical area of the city (as defined by user habits) should be viewed as an integrated ecosystem rather than as a collection of discrete departments and libraries.
2) Users choose spaces based on a variety of factors, including the activity to be undertaken, their current location and how they are feeling. They are not strongly tied to their home

department or Faculty but tend to use multiple locations in a given week and, often, multiple areas within the same location (e.g. the UL). Therefore the most efficient use of resources would be to create a network of varied study environments that are available to members of the University regardless of their department or Faculty.

3) Users need high-, medium- and low-intensity spaces and each hub (and associated halo) should have an appropriate balance, which will vary according to the user base of that hub. The geographical relationship between spaces of different intensity is important to ensure their effectiveness.
4) The intensity of existing spaces can be altered cheaply and easily by, for example, adding desk lamps and pot plants or reducing the number of workstations in a room to 20 or fewer. Low-intensity environments do not necessarily require a lot of space and so are a good way of utilising previously un(der)used areas.
5) The proximity of food can affect use of study spaces. Providing healthy, hot food and tea/coffee near a given study space can encourage users to stay there longer.

A practical result of following these principles was the transformation of two previously 'dead' rooms (the North and South Reading Rooms) in the University Library into well-used low- and medium-intensity study spaces through carefully considered but simple interventions such as adding pot plants and reconfiguring furniture. Several other libraries have used the Protolib principles to inform their own projects, including the Medical Library at the School of Clinical Medicine (**pictured left**), where a better balance of high-, medium- and low-intensity spaces was introduced during a recent refurbishment as a result of consultation with Futurelib staff.

The Futurelib team share all their work with other Cambridge library staff through open meetings, as well as publicly available reports on their website and a blog. They are very happy to advise colleagues across the University who are interested in the optimization of study spaces.

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