

Redesigning and developing the library space at The University High School

By *Stephanie Ward*

Snapshot

Stephanie Ward describes the process of the redesign of the new library space at The University High School clearly outlining every step of the process. Her article highlights the importance of careful and considered planning and community consultation and an obvious passion for the role of school libraries in learning and teaching.

In 2019, The University High School, in partnership with architecture firm ClarkeHopkinsClarke, embarked on an exciting mission to upgrade a number of areas of the school's South Wing to better cater to the needs of a 21st century learning environment. The school library, on the ground floor of this building, was included as part of the refurbishment project. It has taken almost three years for these plans to come to fruition, and in late 2021, the doors to the new library opened to staff and students. Stephanie Ward, Head of Library and Research at Uni High, documents this journey...

The vision

The 2019 Design Development report for the project, prepared by the architects in consultation with the school's planning committee, identifies the intent to 'align the proposed spaces with the school's pedagogical vision', stating:

Students are surrounded by an outstanding learning environment focused on emotional, social and academic development. The University High School has a deep commitment to teaching and learning, placing their students at the centre of the school. However, due to the age of existing infrastructure the physical environment does not align with the pedagogical aspirations of the school.

Whilst the existing library was well-loved and well-used by students as a space to meet, collaborate, create, study, socialise or find refuge, there were a number of ways in which the existing infrastructure was becoming increasingly outdated and inflexible in meeting the needs of the school community:

- The entrance was narrow, restrictive and not clearly visible when accessing the building.



- A large proportion of the library floor plan was designated to office space for the 5 library staff members and a computer room. Having transitioned to a BYOD program, these computer rooms were becoming increasingly obsolete, and there was limited infrastructure to support students using their own devices, such as a lack of power outlets.
- Acoustics were highlighted as a major issue by both staff and students, and there was little to be done in the way of provisioning quiet spaces for reading, studying or meeting in small groups
- The library space was generally quite run down and in poor repair

These challenges were exacerbated by a growing student population and limited existing indoor recreational spaces for students. The former library served the school well when the student population was around 1100 students, and we are now closer to 1700.

This project provided an incredible opportunity to re-envision this existing library space as something more responsive to the needs of the student population, which supports 21st century learning, whilst still respecting and enhancing its place as a social and learning hub of The University High School.

The consultation process

A number of different sources of evidence informed the development of the library design, as well as the feedback provided by the library staff to the architects.

ClarkeHopkinsClarke conducted both surveys and workshops with focus groups of students at Uni High to inform their understanding of priorities for the library space. The results of these conversations and questionnaires highlighted the following:

- Having quiet spaces for independent study was a high priority for majority of students across all year levels.
- Extended opening hours was highlighted as important
- All year levels wanted more soft furnishings, better zoning of spaces with consideration to volume, charging stations, and a greater connection to eating spaces to be considered.
- Older year levels focused more on lighting, acoustics, outdoor connections and quiet study spaces.

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- The library piano was recognised as an important and vibrant part of the library, but also an obstacle to the desired quiet spaces wanted by students.

Comments made by students describing their desired library space were recorded and used to inform conversations about the preferred reality of the new library space.

The library staff too, was able to draw on their own collected data to inform their understanding of students' opinions and usage of the library space. A usage survey conducted by the library in 2016 surveying all students from Year 7-12 had provided us with valuable data to inform the future directions for our school library and inform our discussions with the architects. Whilst the initial consultation between architects and library staff focused more on collection sizes and outlining the existing library programs, library staff also took the opportunity to provide extensive formal feedback to the architects after the initial plans were drawn up. This was a vital opportunity to share the knowledge and expertise possessed by library professionals: not only as observers of students in the library space, and facilitators of the library programs and services, but also as active members of the library profession who routinely engage with conversations and literature surrounding library best practice. Taking the time to share this information with ClarkeHopkinsClarke and outlining our library requirements as well as ideas for developing the scope of our library service, delivered invaluable opportunities to consult and collaborate with the architects and develop a shared vision for the proposed library space.

The design

The proposed plans for the library development highlighted the importance of an environment for students to access digital and physical resources as well as areas to reflect, socialise, collaborate and stimulate the imagination, and included the following key spaces:

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- **A research and collaboration classroom space.** Located next to the non-fiction collection and complete with a projector and whiteboard. This area is designed to facilitate direct instruction and classes undertaking research and collaborative work in the library.
- **A reading room.** Designed to accommodate classes as part of our wide reading program, and containing a projector and whiteboard, this area facilitates direct instruction, and provides an acoustically-secluded space which couples as a makerspace area and meeting room for student clubs at recess and lunchtime.
- **A games and recreation area.** For use during class times as a second reading area for the wide reading program, but designed with more café-style spaces to facilitate social activities during break times.
- **Collaboration and reading booths.** Enclosed, seated spaces designed to be used by small groups of students wishing to relax, socialise or collaborate on classwork or study.
- **An outdoor learning deck.** Located to the north of the library, and backing onto the central quadrangle of the school, this area is designed to accommodate a class of students to read, relax, socialise or study in an outdoor area of the library.
- **A silent study zone.** Containing study carrels, this area is a designated silent space for students wanting a quiet space to work independently.

- **Meeting rooms.** Small, bookable spaces for use by staff and students requiring an acoustically secluded space to meet and collaborate.
- **An I.T. Touchdown zone.** A long bench with many power outlets and USB ports for student use, as well as four library computers. Located close to the new I.T. office, where students can receive tech support.
- **A new entrance.** Accessed via the school's central quadrangle, with large double-doors and located centrally within the library space.
- **The library staff office and welcome desk.** Located centrally in the library, opposite to the library entrance. With sight lines throughout the new library, providing easy access to assistance from librarians.

...a place of social gathering, and also of information exchange...

The designs focused on the importance of the library as both a place of social gathering, and also of information exchange, proposing key features which prioritise the following:

Collaboration - Larger collaborative areas are supported by smaller, acoustically treated spaces for small groups to meet and collaborate.

Flexibility - Modular tables, loose furnishings and mobile shelving give freedom to reconfigure spaces quickly and easily to accommodate either groups of various sizes or individual students.

Sustainability - The new facilities take into consideration Environmentally Sustainable Design (ESD) principles to help the school reduce its energy consumption and minimise environmental impacts. These include features such as:

- Passive solar design, including abundant natural light and internal glazing
- Natural ventilation and airflow, and features which assist in temperature maintenance and prevent heat loss
- Durable, environmentally sustainable materials and finishes
- Retaining and reusing existing building and interior features to limit demolition works and waste sent to landfill
- Adaptive planning, such as designing spaces able to flexibly adapt to changing needs, reducing future works and waste

In addition to this, attention was given to recognising the significant history of the school's location in the details of the design. Prior to The University High School occupying the location, the site bounded by Flemington Road, Royal Parade, Story Street and Park Drive operated as The Northern Market from 1855 – 1939 and included hay-market and cattle, horse and pig market. The design is informed by the central concept of a marketplace, which is reflected in the archways of the library's booths and meeting rooms. The natural materials palette of greens

and oranges was inspired by the market`s produce. The warm timbers featured in the curved bulkheads above key areas including reception, the IT help desk and the main collaboration and reading area reference the historic market booths.

The preparation

On a very practical note, there were a whole host of preparations undertaken by library staff to ensure we were ready for the renovations to occur. Arguably our biggest undertaking was the library's 'genrefication' project, which we began in 2019 and took 12 months to be completed. This meant updating all the fiction catalogue records, and re-stickering all the books, before reshelving all the books into their assigned genre. Whilst this project was not necessarily part of the library renovation itself, by making these big changes to our collection ahead of the library renovation, we were able to take measurements of each of these genre collections, in linear metres: information which proved useful when considering the requirements and layout of shelving in the new library. It also provided a good opportunity to evaluate each of the books in our fiction collection and consider them for weeding.

Weeding was the other big job required to prepare our library collection for the new space. Everything was considered, but particular attention went to our non-fiction collection, as we evaluated what should stay and what should go. There is a lot already written about weeding, and various criteria for evaluating resources – we had more than a few in-depth discussions about the role and value of particular resources as part of our decision-making, but ultimately 30% of our non-fiction resources were weeded – a number that for us felt challenging, but was reflective of our decreasing reliance on print non-fiction, and aims to build a library in line with 21st century learning practices placing more collection emphasis on digital non-fiction. Faculties were also consulted regarding subject-specific resources, textbooks and class sets. SRC students organised book donation drives and book sales, library staff hosted book sculpture workshops, and anything else that could be, was recycled.

The library staff also did a great deal of research around furniture for the new library. ClarkeHopkinsClarke provided some recommendations as a starting point and offered invaluable feedback about the various options we were considering, including advising on the dimensions of spaces and what would fit. Over the course of several months, we investigated an extensive variety of options and suppliers before settling on our decision. We wanted to prioritise soft, padded furniture with metal frames that would be repairable, nothing plastic. We wanted furniture that would support the functions of each area of the library (task chairs, tables and desks for classroom and study areas, and soft armchairs and café tables for more social and relaxation spaces) and that would be accessible for all staff and students. We sought out durable, quality fabrics in muted colours that would complement and not dominate the new library. As part of this, we surveyed students to get their feedback about the kinds of interiors they would prefer for the new space, and found their responses often mirrored our own observations; students expressed a preference for just a few muted colours, as opposed to many bright colours, they wanted the 'vibe' of spaces to feel cosy and relaxing, with a mixture of both enclosed and spacious feeling areas. Other notable suggestions included: lots of plants, 'Hogwarts vibes', and fairy lights.

The start date for the renovation was pushed back many times over the course of this project for widely varying reasons, though undoubtedly the greatest of these reasons was the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020. When the project finally got underway, it was January 2021, and the library began its move into its interim location in the school hall.



The move

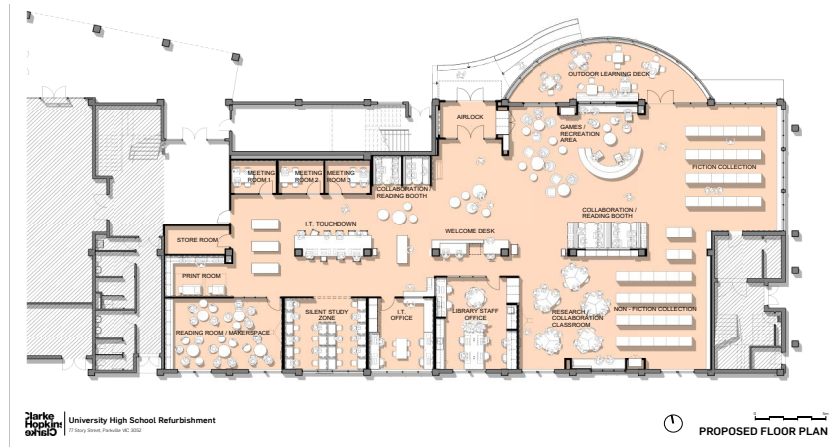
As well as considering the spatial provisioning (of furniture, of shelving, and so on) of the new library space, these considerations also needed to be made when setting up the interim library space.

In anticipation of move, the library staff designed a floor plan for the hall space, taking into consideration our library necessities. This included considerations such as the space requirements and furniture necessary for our library programming (such as reading classes, instructional activities and workshops). It also meant mapping out shelving configurations and locations in the hall space and considering safety requirements such as keeping exits and walkways clear and ensuring the space met accessibility requirements. We also made sure to consider the needs of our students, and as best we could we allocated spaces to relax, to study and to socialise and work in groups. We also needed to consider what access to electricity we would need in this space, for items such as our circulation desk, OPACs and staff workstations, and consider how to designate these areas so that we could efficiently install cabling through the hall to power these areas.

We provided details of the above to the movers in the form of a mud map. Considering these details ahead of time was invaluable in ensuring the move went smoothly, that library items were tagged with locations for moving or for storage, and that there were minimal issues or reorganising necessary. This same planning was done for the move back into the finished library, but with the addition of coordinating the delivery and installation of the new library furniture and shelving to fall after the building works were completed and before the movers were booked. This timeframe enabled us to make a shelving plan for the movers for where our books were to be located on the new shelving.

The outcome

The overall response to the new library has been overwhelmingly positive. We've had so many wonderful conversations with staff and students, all thrilled with the results of the renovation. The buzz that has come with having a shiny new space, the excitement that it has generated, has created a positive mood in the library, and both staff and students have been extra keen to use the spaces and get involved with the library programs.



The new library space has also provided so many fantastic opportunities for the library staff to meet, liaise and collaborate with staff from all over the school. The meeting rooms in particular have been very popular with staff and have facilitated team meetings, cross-marking, online conferences, and staff conferencing with students regarding wellbeing and individual learning needs. We have also been able to host faculty meetings and other professional learning activities for staff, all of which has helped us to foster greater connections with the wider school community.



The students have also particularly valued having access to the meeting rooms and other quiet spaces in the library, using them for online lessons, meetings and appointments, as well as for group project work. Senior students have been very grateful for the addition of the designated quiet study room, and there is a constant flow of students using this area during free sessions for independent study.



The addition of a designated reading room in our new library has been fantastic for providing many of our wide reading classes a secluded space to relax and read, and librarians have made good use of the additional features, such as a projector, to engage students in short, visual, engaging activities as part of the reading program. It has



also been a popular location for student clubs, such that we now have a fortnightly timetable of scheduled activities and clubs running in the library reading room during recess and lunchtime.



The classroom space has also been great for scheduling library workshops and providing direct instruction on accessing digital resources as part of research classes. We have already had a lot of interest with teachers scheduling classes in for research support sessions, and for classes to have time to access the non-fiction collection.

The library booth seating has been by far the most popular seating option in the new library for students. These areas are always occupied with students reading, studying, chatting and playing games, depending on the time of day. These spaces are always in demand and have facilitated some great opportunities for senior student to study collectively.



Interestingly, the outdoor area has been the least active part of the new library, despite a season of delightful sunny weather. There has been some interest in this space as an extension of the games/recreational space in the library, and it has been a very useful extension of space for when the library gets busy, but so far, not as much interest as expected from teachers booking classes outside in the space, or for students to study outdoors.



Practical features such as the addition of more power outlets, and providing students with greater access to I.T. support, have been gratefully received, and we have observed that many more students are taking the opportunity to visit the library before and after school, making the most of our extended opening hours.

Overall, it is wonderful to see the ways in which our new space supports our students in all their endeavours, and we have observed how they feel appreciated by the updates to the space and the ways in which the new design takes their pursuits and needs seriously. We have also observed that by having clearly designated spaces, students require less guidance to use library areas appropriately, and providing a comprehensive orientation program for each year level about the uses and supports available in the new library, has also assisted with this.

Acknowledgements

Our sincerest thanks to the whole project team, including:

- Builder: Renascent Construction Pty Ltd
- Building Surveyor: Design Guide Building Surveyors
- Services Engineers: MJA Consulting Engineers Pty Ltd
- Structural Engineers: Spencer Group Engineer Pty Ltd
- Quantity Surveyor: mbm Quantity Surveying (Design Stage) and Wilde Woollard Quantity Surveyors Pty Ltd (Construction Stage)
- Acoustic Engineer: Octave Acoustics
- Land Surveyor: Goodison & Associates Surveying
- Removalist: Allied Business Removals

with particular mention to ClarkeHopkinsClarke Architects for their creative vision, genuine consultation and enduring enthusiasm throughout the duration of this project. We are so grateful to you all for building us the library of our dreams.

Also, to representatives of School Council and to the members of the Uni High Planning Committee - including former Principal Heather Thompson, Assistant Principal Chris Jones, and Head of Inquiry Learning, Alex Louie – thank you for your work in the design and development of this project. Many thanks as well go to Assistant Principals, Lyndsey Hubber and Liam Ahern, Principal Ciar Foster and our OH&S representative Cameron McCormick for all their work in the project's execution.

The furniture:

- All shelving, ottomans and café tables from Raeco
- Classroom tables from Woods Furniture
- Seats, chairs and outdoor furniture from VE Furniture

Particular thanks to Lisa Sharp and Dean Budde from Raeco for their attention to detail, insights and experience that they so patiently shared with me, as I agonised over each detail and decision.

I would also like to specifically mention and thank our dear friend, mentor and former Head of Library at The University High School, Rob Castles, whose enduring vision and establishment of the library at Uni High as a safe, welcoming and desirable place for students to be, undoubtedly contributed to the view that it was a worthy cause to invest in. We wish you could have seen these fruits of your labour.

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