



Library zoning for dummies: discovering the new library study spaces at Royal Holloway

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What can you learn when you open a new library building? Many things. But those who have experienced moving their library (or libraries) to a new building may also say: expect the unexpected. We would think that any new lesson learnt in the process would be focused around something that we didn't know about at all or some advanced knowledge that we haven't yet discovered. In our case, we didn't *expect* that something as *unexpected* as library zoning, and users' *expectations* around it, would shake up our idea of what we thought we knew about our students. And this is what exactly happened, but let's start from the beginning.

Part 1. The BTNL (Before-The-New-Library) Era

Before our shiny new Library in the Davison building was opened in September 2017, we had the Before-the-New-Library Era. We used to work in two libraries: Bedford Library and Founder's Library in the original College building. The latter is currently being refurbished and is not yet reopened, so we will focus on Bedford Library.

Bedford Library opened in 1993 and this was where the heart of library life was beating: it was larger than its sister in Founder's, there were three levels of study spaces (quiet, silent and group area) and it held the office where most of the library staff were located. But initially this was also planned to be Phase 1 of a larger building, designed to serve a student population of 2700. Since 1993 the student population at Royal Holloway has grown: in the academic year 2017/2018 there were 9256 students studying at the College. Plans for extension of the building in order to provide more study spaces rose and fell between 2002 and 2005. Finally (after appointing the new Principal in 2010), the project for the new building

resumed in 2011, and was approved by the council two years later in 2013.

Student feedback played an essential role in the process of designing the new building. In 2011 the first student and stakeholder meetings took place, followed by three focus groups in 2013 with, respectively: Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught students; Postgraduate Research students; and students with disabilities. Additionally, there were ongoing consultations throughout the design stages with student-staff committees within all academic departments, as well as the Library Users Advisory Group (LUAG). From the feedback, we found out that the new building should:

- fit in with Royal Holloway (especially important due to the very impressive Founder's building and its architecture)
- have library space that was bigger, spacious, accessible, and impossible to miss.
- have no more than one third designated as Group Study.
- be comfortable; this was especially emphasised and the point made that the library zoning should be defined by its aesthetics, so library users could intuitively recognise the space and respect it.

Students also wanted lots of natural light, a café in the same building (but not in the Library), and water fountains. More information about the background of how the building was designed and how the students' feedback influenced it can be found in the presentation by Helen Rimmer and Matthew Brooke: 'As you like it: translating student feedback into the design of the new library building' (see 'Further reading').

In 2017, before the 'big move' to the new building, we wanted to make sure that our library users would be able to say a proper 'Goodbye' to Bedford Library. We knew that this library would be permanently closed once the move was finished and the Bedford Building was in use by one of the academic departments. We decided to set up a graffiti wall in the group study area in Bedford Library, with that UX essential: Post-it notes. We placed a simple question on this wall: 'Will you be missing Bedford Library?' and asked students to write a short note or, if they had more time, a love or break-up letter.

We were expecting that our library users would be tired of good old Bedford and that this would be the main theme on the graffiti wall. Although the building was the central hub of library life on campus, its lack of space, frequent work on various maintenance issues and its look (so '90s!) shouted for change. And here came one of

our first surprises: many students wrote beautiful notes and love letters to Bedford Library! The majority of the Post-its carried positive messages, and even when some negative aspects of the library were mentioned, it was often acknowledged that the authors of these notes had many good memories of Bedford Library. Apart from many funny notes and even short poems, one letter summarised the feedback from students very well:

Dear Beddy, Thank you for always being there regardless if it's early in the morning or late at night. I'm sorry for our fights and the things I said when I was hungry or tired. I love you so unconditionally and I will miss you so much. Yours forever, Thea xxx

On this very sentimental note, we waited for the new library...

Part 2. A new beginning – September 2017

The new Library was opened on 11th September 2017. Entering the new staff office on that Monday morning and unpacking boxes really felt like Christmas Day. We placed first impression boards around the whole building, so visitors could post their comments. Most of the comments mentioned excitement and there was a very positive outlook on the new building, including its spacious feel, furniture and general look. Some of the first visitors were not convinced of the architectural style of the building and favoured the Founder's building instead, located just opposite the new Library.

With over 1140 study spaces (increased to 1250 during our first year) designed to suit various study preferences, a variety of furniture and well-equipped study rooms, we waited for the new academic year to start. The ground floor of the building is also shared with Students Services, Careers, Student Union Shop, Exhibitions Space, Event Space and Café. The rest of the building is occupied by the Library, designed to be two-thirds quiet space and one-third as group study, as requested by our research. The main characteristics of the quiet space (located on the 1st and 2nd floor) are: comfy furniture, train coach-style seats, various styles of wooden desks, cosy interior design) and wood paneling designed to absorb noise. Walls in the group study area (located on the ground and 1st floor) are covered with whiteboards to write on, there are round tables for group work, and long tables and big sofas for large groups. Most of the bookable study rooms are also located in the group area, as well as resource hubs (binders, printers, laptop cupboards), which generates a collaborative atmosphere.

When we opened, there was no zoning signage in the library. The Library Management team wanted students to discover and adapt the spaces according to their preferences. As expressed in the feedback we gathered during the planning of the project, the zoning was reflected by the design of the spaces. There was also another reason – we wanted our students to see library staff as people they can always turn to when they need help. We didn't want to be seen as rule enforcers. The intuitive design of the library was picked up very quickly by our students, and was reflected in the noise levels and atmosphere in each of the areas. However, after the academic year started, we started to receive negative feedback on Twitter, via email and directly from library users. To quote some of the tweets: '...are librarians meant to be enforcing the silent study area? Because that would be helpful at the moment'; and 'It is quite annoying. A library is supposed to be a place of silence. Where is the big sign the Librarian points to saying Silence?' Library staff had been doing regular roving and head counting since the first day, and all information gathered from daily walks around the library confirmed that the interior design reflected the noise levels in all of the spaces; in other words, that the design of the building was influencing the students' behaviour. We decided then to look closer at the user-established zones and to do observations to document the noise levels and styles of studying in each of the spaces.

Part 3. Here comes the UX – November 2017

In November 2017 we conducted observations and mapping - the volunteers would go around the library 3–4 times a day at specific times for 7 days and observe the chosen library areas. Each observer was equipped with a clipboard and a plan of the area, and would record the noise levels and number of people working individually and in groups. Figure 1 (over page) shows an example map; we marked noise levels (in large numbers) as:

1. silent
2. some quiet conversations going on
3. loud

We can see that, in areas intended to be for silent study, it is largely a level of 1 with people working individually. The smaller numbers show the occupancy. Figure 2 shows the group study area on the ground floor, where the helpdesk and High Use collection (titles from reading lists) are located. It was louder here and there were more people working collaboratively.

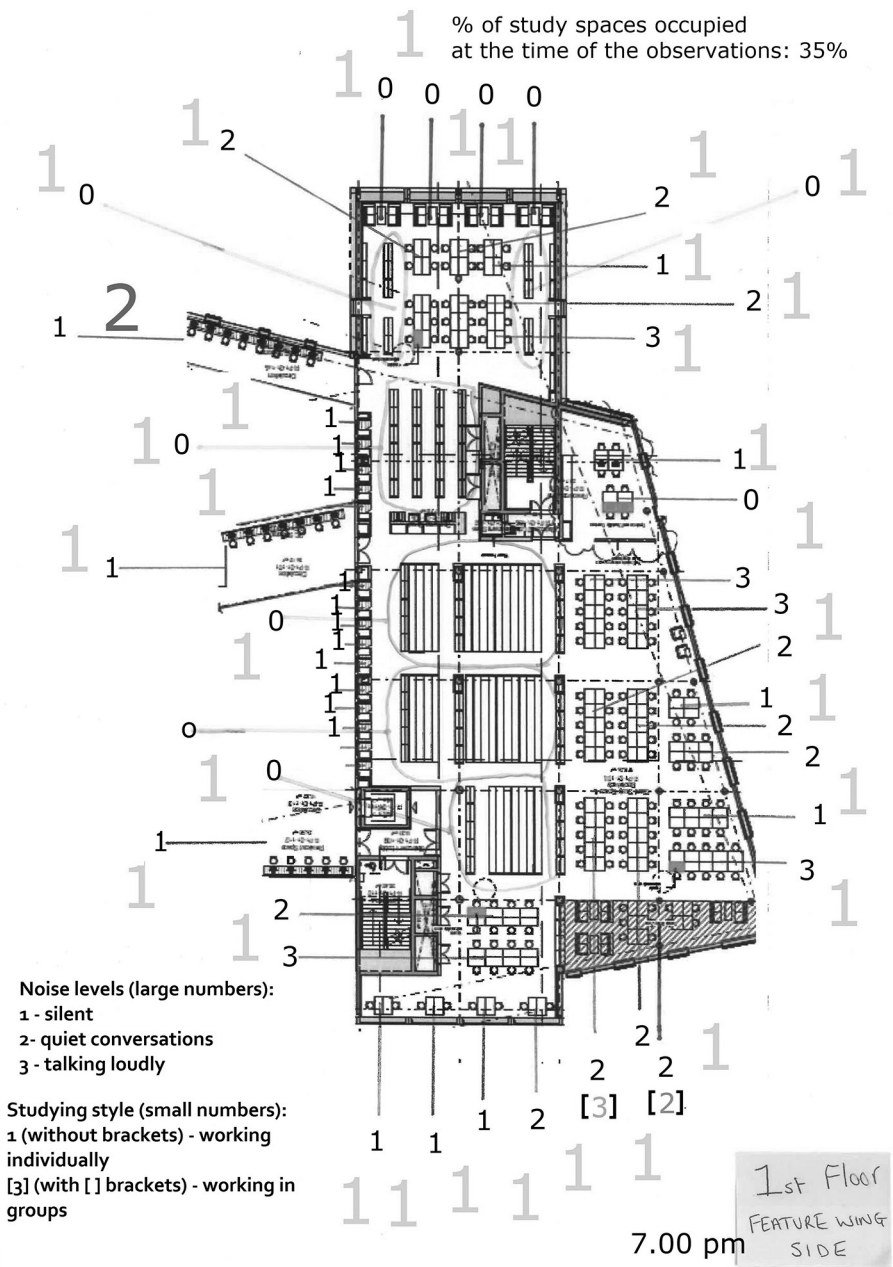


Figure 1 Silent study area – mapping.

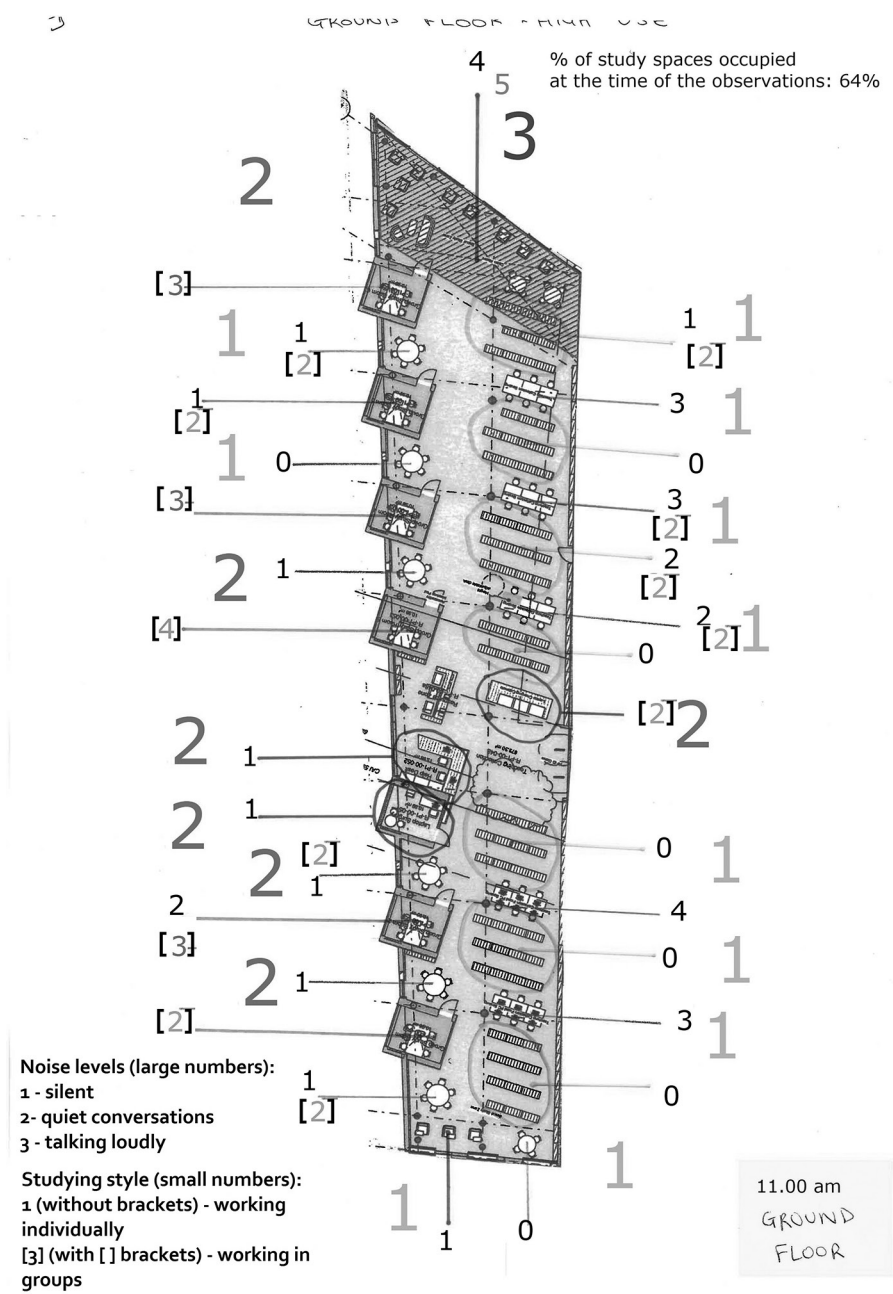


Figure 2 Group study area – mapping.



This research gave us evidence that noise levels were as prompted by the interior design. Library zones were established by library users very quickly. Unwanted noise comes mostly from the foyer. But when it came from people, feedback indicated we were still expected to intervene. We also discovered that in November we had 80% occupied seats in the peak times, but during the exam term the library is much busier!

Despite this evidence that the library design worked, we eventually had to provide signage for the library zones. College management was very concerned about the negative feedback coming from students, who were anxious about the lack of

signage. We were not happy about this, however we still hope that there will be a time when our library users will feel much more aware of their influence on the library zoning.

Part 4. 'The return of the red clipboard' and looking into the future with hope

In April and May 2018 we dusted our red clipboards off and invited students for touchstone tours and cognitive maps. In exchange for small incentives (coffee vouchers or sweets) our students walked us through the Library and made it possible for us to see it from their perspective. The data gathered during this round

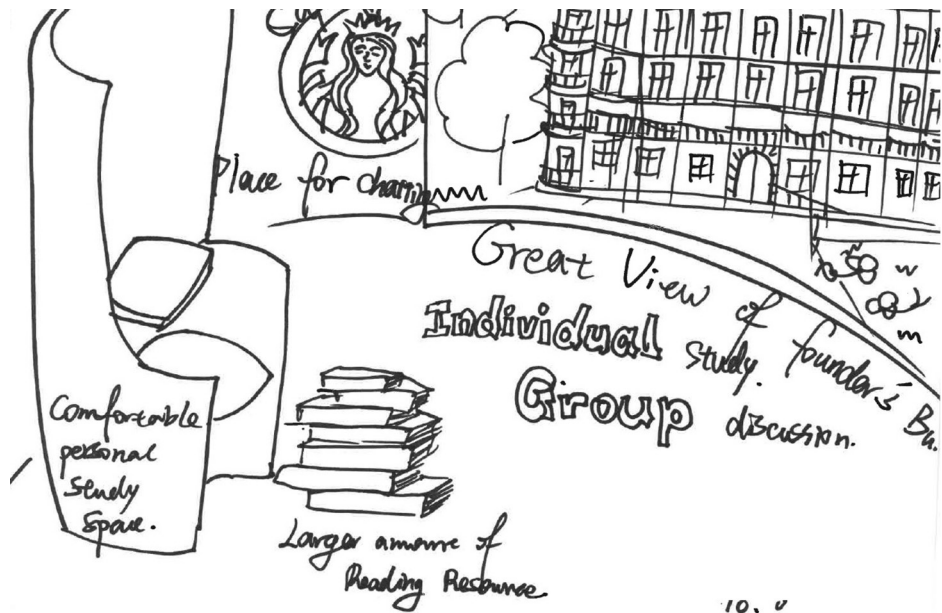


Figure 3 One of the cognitive maps from May 2018.

is still being analysed, however Figure 3 gives a first glimpse into the outcome of this research: a cognitive map appreciating the ‘comfortable personal study space,’ coffee and view on Founder’s.

We are happy that we could back our conclusions that students use the library space as prompted by the design with sound evidence. The outcome of our UX activities helps us in answering feedback from students and helps the management of the library in making research-informed decisions. UX also helps us to be more confident and aware of how these spaces are being used. And in the meantime... we continue to believe that our dream of a library without signage reinforcing behaviours will come true!

Further reading

Brooke, M. and Rimmer, H., 2018. As you like it: translating student feedback into the design of the new library building [Presentation from Annual Conference]. *M25 Consortium of Academic Libraries*. Available at: <<https://www.m25lib.ac.uk/2018/05/02/presentations-from-2018-annual-conference/>>.