‘Protolib’ – Executive Summary

The Protolib (prototyping libraries) project sought to examine the provision of study spaces at the University of Cambridge through the examination of four environments inside and outside of libraries: two reading rooms within the University Library; and two common areas at the English and Law Faculties. By conducting extensive ethnographic observation, behavioural mapping, and exit interviews over a three-month period a rich and hitherto invisible picture of user behaviour was revealed which highlighted the need for some new approaches to library space provision.

Initial research phase

- Co-design sessions, including a large-scale Lego Serious Play workshop, with students, researchers, and library staff which fed into initial prototype designs.
- The creation of prototype spaces based on professed user needs, specifically spaces designed for reading, writing, group work, and break times.

Secondary research phase

- 300 hours of close observation of the prototype spaces, including behavioural mapping of movement and recording behaviour in detail.
- 127 interviews conducted with users of the prototypes, focusing on their experiences of the spaces and what they had been using them for.
- Feedback mechanisms including graffiti walls and feedback cards.

N.B. The same research methods were used in the newly refurbished Engineering Department Library to provide a basis for comparison with project findings.

Key findings

- Users have a hierarchy of working activities that has a direct and definite influence on their choice of working environment.
- Working spaces vary in intensity and the user need for a different intensity environment is directly related to the level of working activity in the hierarchy.
- Providing a range of spaces is essential in order to support productivity and wellbeing.
- The relationship between different spaces and their relative locations needs to be carefully considered when planning or redeveloping spaces.

Other findings

- Reducing the number of chairs in a space can increase occupancy.
- Library users need more space in which to study than was previously the case.
- People are more likely to work opposite each other when ‘sight-line blockers’ are introduced.
- ‘Relaxed but serious’ spaces can be conducive if designed well and in the appropriate context.
- Power, light and humanising features are key elements of successful spaces.

Recommendation

The key recommendation arising from this research was the importance of providing a good ratio of high, medium and low intensity environments to support different activities at different times. Currently there are too few medium and low intensity environments within Cambridge and a better ratio would directly support student productivity and wellbeing.


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