From a traditional academic library to a modern learning environment
Dalarna University Library - expectations and results

Kurt Byström (text)
Victoria Törnqvist (photos)
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Abstract

This report describes the ideas and vision behind Dalarna University's award-winning library in Falun. A description of the planning and construction processes and an evaluation of the final outcome are presented together with experiences and observations drawn from the project.

Key words:
Högskolan Dalarna, Falun, Falu kommun, Dalarna Media Arena, ADEPT architects, Sou Fujimoto, akademiska bibliotek, universitetsbibliotek, bibliotek, lärmiljöer, kollaborativt lärande, arkitektur, biblioteksarkitektur, biblioteksbyggnader, academic libraries, university libraries, libraries, learning spaces, learning environments, collaborative learning, architecture, library architecture, library buildings

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Från traditionellt akademiskt bibliotek till modern lärmiljö
Högskolan Dalarnas bibliotek – förväntningar och resultat
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Introduction

"Like a magical snow-covered landscape. Few Swedish public projects can measure up to the interior of the new university library in Falun." This was how the library at Dalarna University was described in the journal *Arkitektur* (2014:5 p. 44-51). That same year, in competition with projects from some forty countries, the library went on to be awarded first prize in the category "Higher Education and Research" at the *World Architecture Festival 2014*. The library has also featured in a chapter in a Japanese book about European architecture. Since its completion, the library that has received a great deal of attention and recognition. This article describes the thoughts and processes that resulted in the library being what it is today, while detailing what was successful and what fell short of expectations.

Background

The old library at Dalarna University in Falun opened its doors in the early 1990s. From the outset it was ill-equipped for its purpose as a university library, with low ceilings, poor lighting and ventilation, and insufficient space. As the university grew, these deficiencies became more apparent. With a view to providing more space for both books and staff, the library was rebuilt at an early stage, resulting in the removal of group rooms and quiet reading rooms. In addition to this, Campus Falun lacked areas for students to study and sit between lectures and seminars. Even before the turn of the millennium, there were many voices calling for a new library to be built in order to enhance the learning environment at the University.

Over the next ten years, many projects regarding the redesign of the library were commenced. On at least one occasion early in the 2000s, a decision had all but been made, but was revoked for financial reasons. In 2009, the University Governing Board finally decided that a new library was to be built. The local programme that was adopted was a slimmed down proposal, where space for library visitors was prioritised while library staff remained in the old main campus building onto which the new library would be built. As the library was to be built and managed by the local municipality and then leased to the University, a representative board was established which included members from both interest groups.
Thus begun the process of securing an architect, as based on ideas that the library staff had developed (we will touch on these later). After an open invitation, five architectural firms were chosen to provide a sketch of their proposed design. A review group was established, with representatives from University management, the Property and Facilities Office, the library and the municipality together with a few external experts. The group chose to go with a proposal from a consortium comprising the Danish architectural firm ADEPT, the Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto, the Danish interior architects Bosch & Fjord, and the German landscape architects Topotek1. ADEPT carried out the majority of the architectural work and were also the party through which all communication was made. The name of the winning proposal was Dalarna Media Arena.

In March 2014, the new library opened its doors, with the official inauguration taking place on May 15, 2014.

The ideas

The library project had at its core a series of ideas that were formed over several years. These ideas were presented principally as part of the local programme that formed the basis for the architectural work; however, they were clarified and developed by way of talks with the architects at ADEPT.

Core assumptions

Many older, traditional university libraries have been built in accordance with the notion that learning for the main part is an individual exercise. In these libraries, silence and seclusion are prioritised. The basic assumption behind this library project has been that learning is just as much a collaborative exercise – that is to say, it occurs in active dealings with others. Therefore, the library was planned as a way to promote this type of learning, yet without compromising the opportunity for students to also study by themselves in quiet areas.

A further consideration was the fact that we all, as individuals, work in different ways – our learning styles differ, as do our needs depending on the situation. It was therefore important to create as many different types of learning environments as possible.

For a number of years now, it has been claimed that printed media is on the verge of dying out. There is no doubt that the number of e-books in the library continues to increase and that e-journals and magazines have all but wiped out their printed competition. Nevertheless, throughout this project our position has been that the printed book will continue to play a part for many years to come and that there is no clear evidence predicting its eventual disappearance. The library was therefore planned to incorporate both forms of media, whilst retaining functionality in a future with less printed media. Our final choice became what is sometimes referred to as a hybrid library.

A welcoming library

It was important to us to build a welcoming library, in the sense that there would be no unnecessary restrictions. In the old library, staff had led a difficult struggle against the use of mobile phones, loud discussions and coffee cups – a struggle that seldom resulted in victory. In the new library there would be no need for any signs stating what was not permitted; instead, there would be the chance to meet at the centrally placed café, a clear signal that the library was indeed a place for study, but also a place for socialisation and relaxation.
Configured zones

With a relaxed and lively central area in the library, it was important that there would be other more quiet areas for those who wanted them. As such, the library was divided into three zones: one relaxed, one quiet and one silent. Our hope was that room configuration, in combination with the signals indicated by the interior design and furnishings, would be enough to show what type of activity was expected to take place in each respective environment.

Student study areas

One of the library’s most important functions was as a workplace for students, with respect to both individual and collaborative learning. To support this, different types of learning environments within the library were devised. A few examples follow here:

- Sitting in groups in comfortable furniture, with low tables, where coffee cups and laptops have a natural place. This is an environment where audible discussions are permitted and encouraged, and where a person can be seen and see others.
- Sitting in groups in "normal" chairs around a meeting table. This is an environment that signals work. Here there is an increased need for seclusion and an undisturbed environment. It can be a closed group room (with a door), although other room partitions can be used, such as bookcases and screens.
- Sitting in small groups of two to four people around one of the library’s computers. This automatically creates a vocal environment and requires an adapted furniture configuration – perhaps even double screens.
- Sitting in pairs and having discussions or other working interactions. This requires small group rooms or relatively secluded screened off areas.
- Studying individually and in seclusion. This can take place in a quiet reading room or at study places located in various parts of the library. This type of area should be available in the form of both "classical", relatively formal study places as well as more comfortable armchairs.
- Studying individually but not in seclusion. The study places are both classical and comfortable in design and are placed in the more vocal and livelier part of the library with a good view of people coming and going. They can be placed together or individually.

Meeting places and everyday rooms

In addition to requirements based purely on learning, there was, as previously mentioned, also a need for a place on campus where students would be able to spend time outside of their scheduled activities, and where both students and staff would be able to meet and pass the time. The idea was that this building would provide a boost for the entire campus environment. It was therefore important that the café be positioned centrally within the library. We felt it was not sufficient for it to be located simply in the vicinity of the library.

A visible university

The other university buildings at Campus Falun are unassuming in character, being hidden, as they are, behind the Scandic Hotel, a tall and striking building. This has meant that the University at a purely physical level has had a somewhat anonymous existence. The new library was expected to remedy this through the provision of a prominent and spectacular external profile. The library was also to provide an opportunity to project the inner life of the University. There would be an area for exhibitions and an arena for open lectures and other events.
Making digital visible

At the time of planning the library, more than 95 percent of journals and approximately 50 percent of books were in electronic format, something we believed the library users to be largely unaware of. An expressed goal was to make the digital library visible in the physical space.

Clarity and pedagogy

The principle behind the work of the library has long been "help to help yourself": that is to say, students and university staff are themselves responsible for their use of the library, while library staff provide support and training. It was therefore important that the physical library be designed in such a way that visibility and clarity made it easy for visitors to find the help and resources they required. This accessibility was to encompass both visible resources and traditionally restricted resources such as book storage or “stacks”. Significant emphasis was also placed on the signage to be used in the library.

As a way to strengthen the library’s pedagogical role, a room for teaching was planned, something that did not exist in the old library.

Workplaces for library staff

Initially, the idea was that all library staff would have their workplaces in the old main building to which the new library would be connected. The new library was to house a "Language Centre", an organisation that was affiliated with the University’s language courses and programmes. Relatively late in the planning process it was realised that the Language Centre would not be able to secure sufficient funding for the project, thereby leaving a number of rooms over in which a number of library staff were than able to be placed.

Outcomes

Assessments conducted to date demonstrate that for all intents and purposes, the new library has provided the boost for the University that had been hoped for. The new library has seen a dramatic increase in visitor numbers, and for the most part, the visitors are very happy with what they find. Not only does the library fulfil expectations from a purely functional perspective, its spectacular architecture contributes to this functionality. The library is built in the form of a two-levelled spiral, with an open atrium at its centre. Along the outside walls lie a number of "layers" of shelves reaching up to the ceiling, which combine with different environments, nooks and corners to convey a sense of something small-scale in these areas. By contrast, the open atrium, with its skylights that allow for the intake of light, opens up for light and space. The fact that both students and staff enjoy the resulting space is clear.

Workplaces for students

The demand for so many and varied environments has, we feel, been met. According to studies that have been carried out, the majority of students experience the library as a good place in which to study. The seventeen group rooms often fill up quickly during the day, and visitors spread themselves throughout the library, where many appear to have their favourite places to which they return day after day. Those rooms that are least occupied are the two quiet reading
rooms, even though more often than not a few people can be found sitting there. It seems as though most students choose to sit where they can see and be seen, and where there is activity and movement, as in a gallery that spirals around its open central area. The University has a number of programmes and courses within the field of media. These are taught in the old regiment area of town, a 15-minute walk from the library. With media students in mind, a couple of study rooms were designed for working with both sound and picture formats.

There are different types of furniture to choose from – from office chairs and traditional, quite rigid chairs and desks, to comfortable armchairs with coffee tables. These are utilised to about the same degree.

We have received several complaints about the sound level in the library atrium, which leads us to suspect that most of our visitors who are bothered by this, have yet to discover the quiet reading rooms. We are now trying to promote these on our TV screens, and most of the complainants who have been made aware of these rooms seem satisfied.
Meeting place

The library as a meeting place is one of the concepts that functions well. The placing of a café in the library has brought with it a somewhat higher noise level, but was, at the same time, completely necessary for the library to secure the role as campus hub and centre. Clearly, the library is a place not only for studies and research but also for socialisation, something that applies not only to students but just as readily to university staff. The library is a place to meet for a coffee and chat, with staff often arranging work-related meetings within its environs.

Showcasing the university

As mentioned earlier, one of the purposes of the new library was also to showcase the University to both the general public and potential future students. The thought was that it is easier to come to a library to attend an open lecture than it is to open the door to a lecture hall and take a seat even if such a lecture is also intended to be open to the general public.

What we envisioned at an early stage in the planning as being a small exhibition area, with a small stage adjoining the café, evolved over time to be significantly larger and now comprises a sort of grandstand that is centrally placed within the building. Adjoining this is an area that can be used for exhibitions or as a stage. For general use, it is configured with tables, chairs and armchairs, which are used for everything from individual reading and group work to an area in which to socialise. This area, which came to be called simply the Library Stairs, is very popular. In the academic year (the first year) 2014/2015, 45 events of different kinds were held, of which most were open to the general public; these included open lectures given by researchers from both Dalarna University and other educational institutes, presentations of degree projects, panel discussions, press conferences in conjunction with the skiing world cup, book releases and
concerts. A smaller study we conducted showed that students appreciate the fact that the library is used for such activities as those listed, and very few feel that they are disturbed by such events taking place in the centre of the library.

The number of visitors at the different events has varied enormously. We have come to realise that marketing is extremely important and that we need to develop practices in which we work together with the University’s Communications Department. Owing to the popularity of the Library Stairs, we have also received requests to rent out the area or make it available for events that have little or no connection to the University. We review these requests individually with a view to forming a functioning best practice.

With regard to increasing the physical visibility and profile of the University, relative success has been achieved. In terms of size, the library is not especially impressive, yet its exterior commands attention. The exterior consists of a horizontal grid of flanged, glossy stainless steel in front of a façade of larch wood. The steel construction is a work of art created by the Danish artist Jeppe Hein in close collaboration with ADEPT. The thought behind it is that it changes in tempo with the seasons, weather and light throughout the day. As with the rest of the art in the library, it was financed by the Public Art Agency Sweden, and as is often the case with good artwork, there are many opinions as to its merits. The building is visible and it brings about discussion, which is exactly as we had hoped.
Navigating around the library

One of the expressed goals of the library was it should offer visitors transparency and ease of navigation, in line with the underlying principle of "help to help yourself", meaning that it is the role of the library staff to teach students and staff how to find academic information and use the library; not to do the work for them.

As already mentioned, the library’s form follows that of a two-fold spiral. The bookshelves, built in more or less parallel levels, follow this spiral up through the library. This resulted in many difficult choices when decisions were being made as to how to place the book collections. At an early stage, the plan was to organise the books by theme – five different libraries within one – and to differentiate these libraries using, for example, colours, decor and signage. This proposal was abandoned after theoretical test placements and discussions with the architects. A clear demarcation between the libraries proved difficult. Rather than facilitate navigation, the idea made it more difficult. It was therefore decided that the books would be placed in one single collection.

Our discussions on shelf placement took place at the same time that many Swedish libraries were moving away from the Swedish SAB system to the Dewey classification system. We decided to retain SAB, partly because we realised we would not manage to reclassify the entire collection whilst planning the new library and implementing the physical relocation. Certain other libraries operate with both classification systems, with older publications placed according to SAB and newer publications following the Dewey system, however encompassing the two systems simultaneously was never a consideration for us since we believe that browsing through the shelves remains an important way for many to find information and that such a division would lead to confusion. Further, we concluded that there were very few gains to be had by a library like ours to move to the Dewey system, not least when considering the great amount of work that would be required. The books can still be found according to the Dewey code in Libris for anyone who wants to do so. Furthermore, we felt that there were few advantages in moving to Dewey given the amount of work it entailed. The decision does not mean Dewey will never be considered; rather, it was simply the case that we had more important issues to consider at that time.
Once the decision to continue using SAB had been made, further placement models were devised until a sufficiently good option had been developed. With this in mind, and put in simple terms, it can be said that section A of the library sits at the lowest point in the building and that the other sections then move in alphabetical order upwards, concluding with section V at the highest point.
The next step was to develop a signage system for the library. We could not find anything on the market that we felt suited the design of the library; therefore, we asked our architects from ADEPT to develop a signage system in close collaboration with us. All signs are in both Swedish and English. The largest components of the system – the large signs that show the main subject sections – were constructed as boxes that fit precisely into the shelves. They can be easily moved around the library as the collection develops. This concept was subsequently used for other types of signs, which are clearly legible from relatively long distances in the central part of the library – for example, from the information desks and the Library Stairs. These signs show, for example, the location of the toilets and printers, as well as indicate the way to the different subject departments that are not directly visible. The large signs are complemented by shelf edge signage indicating subject subcategories. These are made from flanged metal, painted white and are easy to reposition. We realised at an early stage that there were certain positions where it was difficult to understand intuitively where the continuation of a shelf was located. In these positions, we invented our own type of sign based on the design of the shelf-edge signage, in which text together with simple symbols state for example: "continue around the corner"; "on the opposite side", "on the other side of the door", and so forth. In a few cases of desperation, we could think of nothing more precise than "Continue to the corner past the computers".

As a complement to the signage system, a digital map was acquired that connects to our library catalogue. Using this, users can see the location of a book or a subject section. Although the map systems function, it is unclear exactly how much help it provides visitors. Owing to the unorthodox shape of the library, it appears to be difficult to translate the digital map into the physical reality.

In summary, it can be said that while the library itself does not make it easy for visitors to navigate around it, most visitors manage without any great difficulty, and we believe that our signage system is a contributing factor. What pleases us most are the large signs that are visible from the centre of the library that help visitors determine exactly where to go from the outset.
An important idea was to make visible the virtual library within the physical library. During the planning phase, we ran a number of different projects in an attempt to find ways to do this. In addition to study visits, we discussed ideas internally, with the architects and the University’s NGL Centre. We also received funding from the Vice-Chancellor’s strategic fund to develop ideas together with SICS, the Swedish Institute of Computer Science.

Most of the ideas that resulted from this process did not reach fruition, largely due to cost factors. In some cases, the ideas raised would have been beneficial in the short-term, however would have required too many resources to maintain and develop over a longer period.

The relatively simple idea that emerged from this process consisted of two components: a visible presence of video screens of different dimensions within the library; and an internally developed touch-screen system for the promotion of the library’s e-books on the shelves together with the printed books. The system allows for each screen to send a search to our discovery system Summon, after which book cover images are retrieved from Syndetics and are shown on the screen in the form of a rolling display. There are approximately twenty screens on which the varied content is adapted according to the subject section where the screen is located. Although the full text of the book is not able to read on the screen, a summary is usually available. A link is provided for emailing the book to the user, together with a QR-code which enables the book to be downloaded directly onto a digital device. The system is completely automated for the user and relatively simple to edit searches from the administrative side. We have not conducted any formal evaluation of the system, and it does not deliver any search statistics. Observations suggest that it may not be used particularly often, nonetheless, it contributes to a positive impression of the library from a visitor standpoint. The systems achieves its purpose of increasing the visibility of the large number e-books in the library’s collection.

In addition to e-books, some screens also display the table of contents of important journals within the displayed subject area. It proved difficult to automate this part of the system, due mainly to the lack of high-quality images of journal covers. This meant that we were only able to
use small images, which resulted in the application being rather uninteresting from a purely visual perspective. Furthermore, certain core journals were excluded completely as no cover images could be sourced.

The indoor environment

As the primary source of light into the central atrium is by way of skylights, it was feared that the area would feel dark and enclosed, however these fears proved to be unfounded. Natural light abounds and visitors have been heard to compare a visit to the library as a form of light therapy.
When it comes to ventilation and temperature, there have, however, been a number of complaints. On occasion, the library has been too cold, while during events where there are many in attendance, it tends to be too warm. This problem has been somewhat alleviated through a reworking of the technical system, yet remains less than optimal.

Acoustics

Acoustics have proven to be problematic, despite the assurances of acoustic experts involved in the project. Sound reverberates in the central atrium, in a similar matter to that of old churches. As a result, library staff working at the information desk often have difficulties hearing what is being said, and speakers on the Library Stairs require a microphone. Furthermore, there is also a whispering gallery effect – that is to say, what is being said in one area of the library can be heard clearly from a long distance in another part of the library. On the positive side, be it by fortunate mistake, the library makes for a particularly good venue for acoustic music. We have hosted choirs and string orchestras, always with fantastic results in terms of sound. The result of this is that we are cautious about taking any drastic measures to rectify the acoustic problems due to fears of disrupting this positive aspect.

Accessibility

In the original architectural proposal, the main part of the library comprised a gently sloping, spiral-formed ramp, interrupted by several horizontal resting spots. This proposal formed the basis of the much of the work throughout the planning process. However, when it came time to apply for a building permit, the local building committee raised questions over disabled accessibility and whether these concessions complied with the Swedish building code. The municipality’s project leader had on a number of occasions referred to “Building for Disability” a handbook published by the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, which contains accessibility guidelines that are even more specific than the Swedish building code. Consequently, it came as a great surprise to us when it became clear that the building did not in fact meet building requirements in this area and that the plans would need to be redrawn. This led to a delay of about one year and resulted in the present construction of the building: a series
of horizontal half levels, with stairs and lifts between them. The design now complies with all formal requirements; however, the degree of accessibility remains debateable and likely depends on the disability in question.

Workplaces for library staff

From the outset, it was intended that workrooms for the library staff (about 12 people) would be located external to the library, off a corridor that lies adjacent to the library. As a result of the planned Language Centre (which was to be part of the new library) not securing finance, sudden changes were required late in the planning process. While we preferred not to be located in separate office areas, nor did we want another department to move into the suddenly empty offices. Finally, it was decided that eight library staff members would have their offices in the new library, while the others were to sit in the adjacent building, which is home to lunch, coffee, post and photocopying facilities, yet located quite far from, for example, the automatic book return in the new building. It would have been more practical if these had been closer together. Since the offices in the library were drawn with another department in mind, they are different in shape and size in terms of both the windows and the rooms themselves: not particularly practical perhaps, but rather nice nonetheless. There are two people each in a couple of rooms, whereas the others are designed for one person only. Having staff members in such close proximity to the public part of the library is beneficial, although having staff divided into two areas is not optimal. It would have been preferable to have had room for all staff members in the library.

Information desks

The library has two square information desks close beside each other in the centre of the library. The idea behind this was to try to eliminate the traditionally rigid relationship between library staff and visitors. The intention was that there would be no front and back to the desks so that staff and visitors would be able to find information together. In reality, this has not been the case. One of the reasons is that the floor where the information desks are located is the only one that still slopes – in the way that was intended in the original library design. In the long-term, standing
on such a sloping floor would be physically damaging for staff; therefore, a small, level floor has been built on one side of the information desks. This then led to other problems, namely the creation of a raised edge that has caused a number of visitors to stumble, and leading us to prefer that visitors did not go to that side of the desk. Furthermore, this flat level has led to the library staff almost always standing on that side, which means that the desks, despite best intentions, have clearly defined front and back sides. Sometimes, staff place a chair on that side of the desk too, which further adds to this. Therefore, a more traditional information desk setup, with visitors on one side and staff on the other, has ensued.

**Books storage**

The architects’ answer to our request for open storage was to place the closed stacks above the accessible collections. Since the library was designed to have shelves from floor to ceiling, this was an obvious idea that would resolve the issue without any requirement for extra surface area. As a means of reaching these seldom-used books that were placed higher up on the walls, a system of wall-fastened yet movable ladders on tracks was suggested. They were to have broad steps and handles on both sides, and were considered by most staff members to be a satisfactory solution. Although we would not generally have to climb higher than 80 cm, the greater challenge
to this concept was more pedagogical in nature. How would users understand that the books on
the two overhead shelves were not from the same collection as those on the shelves below?
Would this mean that a library that was, through its design, already not the simplest to navigate
would be made even more confusing? We have yet to find a satisfactory solution. Furthermore,
and despite us not agreeing with their reasoning, the Swedish Work Environment Authority did
not consider our step idea to be sufficiently hazardous to prohibit us from taking the design
further. This has meant that a large amount of older literature remains in the old, closed-off
storage area.

Room for improvement

In most respects, the library is can be considered a success and it has undoubtedly fulfilled the
most important expectations. It is an inspiring and aesthetically pleasing learning environment,
used as both a meeting place students and staff, and an arena for exhibiting and promoting
University events. However, there are of course things that we would do differently if we were
given the chance to begin again.

One aspect that does not function at all well are the integrated floor boxes that are placed
throughout the library to provide visitors and staff with electrical outlets and in some cases,
access to the data network. These have proven to lack the durability required for daily use. These
proved themselves to be of a model that was not suitable for everyday use. Visitors do not understand how to open and close them and thus are rather hard-handed when using them, the result being that they have become damaged. We are in the process of replacing some of these with more durable models.

Furthermore, the positioning of the toilets is not completely satisfactory. These are located at the lowest part of the library, with an additional disabled toilet located in the highest part of the building. There are unfortunately no toilets close to the café, where many visitors congregate.

The size of the library’s computer and teaching room became somewhat smaller during the planning phase and we did not react strongly enough to this change: the result is that the 16 computers that are now placed in a rather cramped configuration.

![Image of a library computer room](Image)

There is a large storage area under the Library Stairs. The original purpose of this space was for storage of the wheeled exhibition screens when they were not in use. At one stage during the long planning process, the municipality’s project leader was replaced by another who was not...
especially interested in communicating with library staff or management. As a result, a steep concrete stairway was placed between the Library Stairs and the storage area, something we only became aware of one the concrete stairway was in place. It goes without saying that large screens cannot be wheeled up and down a steep stairway, which is why the storage area cannot be used as was intended.

**Lessons learnt**

Perhaps the most important lesson we can conclude from this multi-year planning and construction process is just how important (and difficult) communication is. A whole separate article could be devoted to this issue.

There have been many stakeholders in this project: the University, the municipality, architects, construction companies, external consultants, and so forth. There were also different parties within these organisations and companies that were not always of the same mind. The knowledge and understanding of what a library is, and what specific requirements it entails, has not always been satisfactory either. In the worst cases, certain stakeholders idea of a library was based on their personal experiences gained several decades ago. Since they believed their knowledge to be sufficient, they did not always feel the need to communicate with us more than was absolutely necessary. It was therefore a struggle at times to ensure that our views were heard. The communication process was also influenced by relationships between the different actors and their particular personalities. This has been most noticeable in our contact with representatives from the municipality’s property agency. Towards the end of the project, the relationship was good, yet at certain times it was extremely strained, mostly due to staff changes within the agency. This was something that clearly affected dynamics throughout the process.

In terms of communication, a particularly positive experience has been our relationship with the architects from ADEPT: they were always receptive, creative and easy to work with. They always listened and took to heart our ideas and, in most cases, reworked them so that they became better than what we had envisioned. We also found the construction company’s project leader to be a creative person who listened to us, despite having to work within budget constraints and not always being in agreement with us.

There is also a great deal that can be said about communication between library staff themselves. The process involved a number of choices with regards to how much involvement there should be from colleagues. Library management wanted the staff to feel involved in the process, yet at the same time it was important to ensure that the project had momentum and that the primary ideas were retained, even when there were dividing opinions among staff. The library project was led by a management team consisting of the library’s director, vice director and project leader. Special working groups were set up during different phases to work with specific tasks. Not all issues were discussed by all staff members, and it is possible that some felt that they were not adequately involved. Some decisions needed to be made on short notice, while a number of basic ideas were quite simply non-negotiable. Nonetheless, most issues were discussed with all staff members and decisions on these were in line with the majority of their opinions.

Another issue involving both communication, and to a greater extent, competence, is the perception of experts and consultants working on the project. For a project of this magnitude, we are talking about an impressive number of people working with such practicalities as electricity and lighting, ventilation, acoustics, accessibility, alarm systems, construction and so forth. In hindsight, we now realise that we should have devoted more time to double-checking their work and results. We believed – perhaps too readily – that they knew best. Whilst undoubtedly true, their
expertise did not prevent them from making mistakes. In some cases, we were able to fix the problems, yet we did not understand the consequences of others. In certain cases, we were simply not involved when decisions were made. Naturally, there is a problem with competence on the part of the University too. Neither the Property and Facilities Management Office nor the library had the technical capabilities required to be able to assess certain solutions. In the best of worlds, the library should have had its own technical consultant that followed the project. This no doubt would have been considered an unnecessary expense, however, in our case, mistakes were made that cost money to correct, that is if they were able to be corrected at all.

Perhaps clearest lesson learnt from this process is as the only stakeholders to have real competence when it comes to understanding what a library is, library staff must be involved at every level, including meetings to discuss technical aspects, even when others might not deem their attendance necessary.

Final word

A project of this size inevitably encounters a variety of difficulties, yet these were considered relatively minor in relation to the library as a whole and its significance for the university today. The overwhelming majority of our visitors, both from within the university and beyond, react enthusiastically to the surrounds. Those of us who work in the library are also positive, and regard the new library as having exceeded our expectations. It is somewhat uplifting to spend the day working in such a visually stunning environment, especially with so many appreciative visitors. The most common response from our visitors may not particularly analytical or articulate, but it is clear: “Wow!”