

From One Library to Another: the New Robert de Sorbon Library of the University of Reims

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A powerpoint presentation containing photographs of the library is available from http://www.zhbluzern.ch/liber-lag/PP_LAG_08/Wednesday/El_Bekri_Liber%202008-def.pdf.

Abstract

The new Robert de Sorbon library opened its doors in September 2006. The county of Champagne Ardenne managed the planning of the new building. The project focused on a totally new way of running this library and affirmed its structural role on the campus. The ambition was to make the future library the reference centre of the university and a real support to education and research. This library is also one of the first libraries in France to adopt high environmental quality as a global approach.

Key Words: Academic libraries; new build; France; Robert de Sorbon library

The Robert de Sorbon library of the Reims and Champagne Ardenne University is located in the suburbs of Reims (northeast of Paris), on the Croix Rouge Campus, and it is the most important library of the university in terms of collections, users and staff. The road to its opening was a long one.

Some Figures

Reims University is multidisciplinary, it was created in the 1960s, and it has 21,000 students and about 2,000 teachers, researchers and staff. The Croix Rouge campus houses three faculties: Law and Political Sciences; Economics and Social Sciences, and Literature and Humanities. The library houses also the central services for all the libraries of the university. The budget for the new library was €22M and the building covers 9,000 square meters.

Background

The first library was built at the beginning of the 1970s, and until 1998 it housed two distinct and specialized departments: law and economics, and literature and humanities. These two departments used to have different working practices; nevertheless, they shared the same building. They systematically duplicated all services: cataloguing, interlibrary loan, and periodicals service. They provided two distinct and specialized collections.

In 1997, the University planned a 5,500 square meter extension to this building to respond to the need for space for collections and users. Just at this point, the security commission expressed their concern because of real problems of security, insufficient emergency exits and structural disorders of the building floors. The commission forced the university to move 40% of the collections into closed stacks outside the campus and obliged us to organise what consequently became very complex access to this collection. It also limited the number of simultaneous users permitted access inside the library.

Fortunately, in 1998 new build was decided upon, after an expert study showed that it would be more expensive to renovate the old library. It allowed us to re-think ways of running the library and to affirm its structural role on the campus. We were very lucky in being assisted by a really thoughtful contracting owner, who paid attention to all of our wishes. The University president gave us complete authority over the project. We had also a close dialogue with the architects.

We decided to merge the two departments and the two collections. We decided also to change the classification from UDC to Dewey to improve access to

information and make storage easier and faster. It was quite a challenge to process about 150,000 volumes without closing the library at any time. It took about two years for all the staff (about 40 people) to effect this change.

The project focused on our ambition to make the future library one of the major reference centres — if not the only one — of the University, largely open to new technology. The library was envisioned as a real support to education and research. We wanted, and I hope we succeeded, in reforming everyone's idea of what a library could be. For us, the challenge was also to build a new library inside. We intended to make the user the central focus of the library organisation. As for the staff, the new library was to change radically their way of working and in a certain way their way of thinking. All in all, the whole of the building process was also a building process in our minds.

The Main Services for Users

There are three front desks to welcome users and serve the different functions of a library, such as reception, loan, registration, interlibrary loan and reference services.

We worked hard to help users become as autonomous as possible and to find what they want very easily. The collections are arranged in seven thematic areas, which are signalled by seven different colours to be found on the book labels.

Free Access to our Collections in a Very Large Open Space

The new building, on two levels of about 6,000 square meters, allowed us to provide a comfortable place for special services such as:

- quick and easy access to the collections in closed stacks;
- 175 seats with computers and free access to our databases, online periodicals, internet or office support software;
- reprography solutions with 8 photocopiers and 10 printers;

- 6 group study rooms;
- CD and DVD facilities;
- newspaper reading room;
- facilities for eye-disability;
- 3 seminar and training rooms;
- 1 teachers' room.

The Green Library

This library was one of the first libraries in France to adopt high environmental quality as an overall approach. It was a real political wish to develop this approach and to make the library an example in this county. From the beginning of the programme, a specialized office assisted the project administrator and another one assisted the architect to develop and realise the main goals of the project, chosen from among the 14 targets identified.

Primarily, the chosen targets stressed:

- natural light and reading comfort;
- very good levels of acoustic comfort;
- very good levels of interior comfort during summer without air-conditioning;
- a good treatment of main services consumption: heating (the target was for example 25 kw/m²/net surface/year and was finally realised at 60 kw/m²/net surface/year), rainwater harvesting for flush-filling, artificial light-dimming according to natural light.

For the library, all these targets contribute to real comfort for our users. This approach also contributes to improve the quality of the services to users. The targets were chosen with this in mind. For the financing and political body of the Champagne Ardenne region, public image is also an important factor. For the librarian, this approach forced us to rethink how we use the building, and many discussions were held on this topic. The benefit was also financial, because a larger budget was allocated to this area of planning and now fewer resources are necessary to maintain the building.

Conclusion

Rethinking the way we welcome our users has proven to be quite a success:

- it reveals the best integration of the library into university life;
- beyond the new building, it really improves accessibility: extended opening hours, extended computer facilities, extended on-line services (with distributed workstations for consultation of electronic documents and wifi access);
- real quality of comfort, very good lightning, more seats;
- plenty of new visitors and plenty of users (an increase of 25%);
- a very good choice of materials and equipment;
- development of training activities for library research;
- integration of new collections from small libraries on the campus (more than 30,000 volumes);
- and, at last, a new regard for the library.