





# cathays specific

Identity. A sense of place. Cardiff is a regenerated city that has a strong vision of itself – and what it stands for. A key component of the Cardiff package is its strong academic reputation, centred on Cardiff University.

We recently crossed the Severn to check out the imaginatively refurbished Trevithick Library – and to find out more about the Cardiff experience.

We asked Ruth Thornton, Trevithick Librarian, to explain the background to the project. 'Back in 2004, the Library Service at Cardiff University underwent a major review. This made numerous recommendations including that the number of libraries should, in the longer term, be reduced from 11 to three on the Cathays Campus in the city centre. Trevithick Library would be one of the ones to stay, and would be refurbished. The review, in combination with very good timing with the call to universities for bids for Wolfson Foundation funding, meant that we could go ahead with the refurbishment pretty quickly. It has also proved to be a good opportunity to try out various ideas on a smaller scale before embarking on much bigger refurbishments, and, eventually, a new build.'



Photography: Betina Skovbro ([www.skovbro.com](http://www.skovbro.com))

## case study



Working closely with Amanda Heal of the Welsh School of Architecture's Design Research Unit, Ruth embarked on a combination of user research and benchmark comparisons with similar projects. The involvement of the Library Service in this phase was critical, as Ruth explains. 'I didn't want this to be a refurbishment that was 'down to us', and instead wanted to be actively involved wherever possible throughout the process. As a University Library Service we've been keen to go out and see new library spaces. So, for example, colleagues visited the inspiring Saltire Centre, and I visited Sheffield's Information Commons. Both are very impressive – and way beyond our budget. But it was interesting to take away ideas that could be scaled down to fit the size of the Trevithick project. Amanda and I also visited Portsmouth and Southampton Universities' libraries together as they had undergone refurbishments and extensions. The visits with Amanda were a real eye-opener as it showed that we looked at very different things when going into a library. I've really come to appreciate the importance of having an eye for detail!

'As for research into users' needs, we'd been taking informal feedback for some time. During my nine years there had been constant complaints about the light, and how drab everything was. We carried out a short email survey of the undergraduates and talked about the plans at staff/student panels. The response rate to the questionnaire wasn't great, but the message that came through was how important the furniture was. In particular, the students complained how uncomfortable the chairs had become, and that open plan just didn't work. We'd also realised that with the advent of so much electronic information now being available, particularly electronic journals, the academic staff and researchers were not visiting as much as they had done before. Anecdotally, we know they felt that the old library was too loud and full of undergraduates! We wanted the Library to become the place to go for all our users.'

We asked Amanda to explain the design challenges presented by the 'old' Trevithick Library, and how the design of the space resolves the issues. 'The lighting was very poor at 80 lux, and there were problems with use of space, provision of services and a lack of group working rooms. In addition, the ventilation was bad – it has always felt stuffy – but ultimately, there was no identity, no sense of place. The key to the design vision was to organise the building in two



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▶▶▶ distinct zones – light space for people, and darker space for books. A similar clear split was between a noisier area such as the entrance and quiet areas for undergraduate and research study.’

Our tour of the Library reveals the elegant and subtle scheme, with light at its core. Opening up the roof lights is perhaps the most significant element, but everywhere there are well thought through touches that enhance the effectiveness of the design. ‘Quite often, institutional buildings have even light levels throughout,’ comments Amanda. ‘At Trevithick we’ve recognised that a more subtle solution is required in a library. So, for example, background lighting is enhanced in research/study areas with good quality task lighting – we used BAP from Luceplan. We’ve also used the existing columns for ambient lighting, the columns also housing improved ventilation and power supply – the whole effect opens up the space.’

The restrained intelligence of the design is confirmed in the Journal Lounge adjacent to the entrance. The challenge of a relatively low ceiling height is dissipated by various techniques; a combination of long ceiling tiles and high quality Burmatex carpet in a dark plain colourway has the effect of making the floor to ceiling distance feel higher. This is further enhanced with sconce lighting fixtures, as well as splashes of colour on the split level computer bar and the Arper Catifa lounge chairs and stools which add visual interest and promote an aesthetic ambience.

In the main study/research areas, the use of the slim profiled Faram Cartesio workstations, complete with glazed screens and the Luceplan task lights creates a stunning grade of quality untypical in a

university library. Clean lines, restrained elegance – the overall effect is of a space that is both studious and uplifting. With further seating provided by Arper and Connection’s IS task chairs, it’s clear that the provision of furniture is a major aspect of the Trevithick experience.

‘We worked closely with PJ Statham at Momentum to get the furniture right. Some companies just tried to sell to us, but PJ cared about getting it right for us and listened. There was a lot of attention to the details, such as the simple basket-based cable management and the interface with the task lights on the workstations.’

‘We had a budget that was partially funded by the Wolfson Foundation, and then more than match-funded by the University,’ comments Ruth. ‘This was a decent enough budget, but we did find that once we’d decided on the type of furniture we really wanted to see in the Library that the furniture element wasn’t going to stretch far enough. Consequently, we investigated the potential of corporate sponsorship via our colleagues in the School of Engineering and the University’s Development and Alumni Division. The zoning that we’d incorporated in the design scheme proved to be useful as we had readymade packages that could be offered as sponsorship deals. We were very successful in gaining funding from several companies, an alumnus of the University and an educational trust. This made all the difference to the specification and has really enhanced the facilities we could provide.’

The ultimate accolade that may be bestowed on the refurbished Trevithick Library is that it creates an identity. At first base, the Library provides the service that students expect and pay for. Beyond that

though is Cardiff University’s view of itself as a world class university in a vibrant city that’s Europe’s youngest capital. Attracting the best students from around the world needs a strong sense of place – Trevithick is a major contributor to Cardiff’s stature as a capital of culture and learning ●

## essential ingredients

<b>Client:</b>	• Cardiff University
<b>Architect:</b>	• Design Research Unit Wales 029 2087 0415
<b>M&amp;E Engineer:</b>	• Cardiff University Estates Division
<b>Main Contractor:</b>	• DJ Godwin 029 2062 6524
<b>Furniture Supply:</b>	• Momentum 029 2023 6266
<b>Systems Furniture &amp; Screens:</b>	• Faram 020 7456 9400
<b>Task Seating:</b>	• Connection 01484 600100
<b>Seating:</b>	• Arper 01304 360236
<b>Partitioning:</b>	• JEM Interiors 01443 480702
<b>Lighting:</b>	• Artemide 020 7631 5003
<b>Focus Lighting:</b>	• Dextra 01747 858100 Concord Marlin 0870 606 2030
<b>Task Lighting:</b>	• Luceplan 020 7225 1720
<b>Flooring:</b>	• Burmatex 01924 262525
<b>Ceilings:</b>	• Armstrong 0800 371849