

*SCONUL Focus* is the journal of SCONUL, the Society of College, National and University Libraries.

*SCONUL Focus* aims to bring together articles, reports and news stories from practitioners in order to generate debate and promote good practice in the national libraries and the university and college sector. As well as the paper copy, the current issue of *SCONUL Focus* is also available electronically via the SCONUL website (<http://www.sconul.ac.uk>). Contributions are welcomed from colleagues in all fields and at all levels: we merely request that the items contributed are concise, informative, practical and (above all!) worth reading.

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## Transforming libraries

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Perhaps it is a credit crunch thing but the national media seems to have recently (re-)discovered public libraries.

Some of the stories are 'doom and gloom'. Rachel Cooke, for example, has bemoaned the fact that 'yoga and coffee' are taking over from books in some libraries in a misguided attempt to widen participation, in her rallying Observer essay 'Time to go into battle to save our world of books' <sup>1</sup>.

Other articles have been more positive. Plans to build the UK's biggest ever public library in Birmingham received plaudits from the literary great and good in *The Guardian's* wonderfully titled 'Books at Birmingham's heart as recession begins a new chapter of public libraries' (where do these sub-editors get their training?!) <sup>2</sup>.

Of course, being a library issue, there are always going to be frank exchanges in the letter pages/blogs about the role of libraries but *The Guardian* piece was a bit more realistic than the usual 'spend less on buildings and more on books and that'll stop the rot' we get from Disgruntled of Tunbridge Wells. The Head of Birmingham Library Services was given the opportunity to pronounce his intentions at some length:

"We are trying to redefine the library and archive in a major city centre. For 150 years the role of the library was to democratise access to books and information which many could not afford. That model of service is being challenged.

"The number of books we loan out and reference inquiries we receive is sliding. We can all use Google and with discounts on Amazon, three-for-two offers in Waterstones and Tesco discounting every Harry Potter book, many of us have the means to buy books. We need to make the library more of an experience. Our role will now be less about transactions with users and more about aiding their transformation."

The rather tired-looking library will itself be transformed:

'Visitors arriving when the new library opens in 2013 will be confronted by an airy atrium filled with touch-sensitive computer screens and regularly changing exhibitions. Voluble group learning will take precedence over hushed reading rooms.'

Transforming tired-looking buildings into beautiful modern environments?

Transforming usage from warehouses for books into interactive forums for the use and creation of knowledge?

Transforming our users?

Doesn't this sound curiously familiar to those of us who have been working in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) over the last few years? All around us are magnificent changes to the physical library. *SCONUL Focus*, with its usual aim to assist in the sharing of good practice, has been keen to spread the word about developments, with articles on flagship spaces (the Saltire Centre <sup>3</sup>, the Learning Grid <sup>4</sup> and so on) as well as reports on sometimes more modest changes in our 'News from member libraries' column. SCONUL itself has promoted and praised innovations as both an active partner in Designing Libraries (with its exceptionally useful online buildings database)<sup>5</sup>

and by celebrating excellence with its Library Design Awards<sup>6</sup>.

We thought it was now time that Focus included an update on developments and these are brought together in Carol Kay's excellent collection of essays that follow this editorial. This is an inspirational collection that shows just how wisely we have invested in our library spaces over the last few years. And – speaking partly from experience – this investment has paid off for many of us with increased footfall and increased student satisfaction (something perhaps HEI managers interested in getting a good return on future investments should bear in mind as we enter a period of financial stringency).

Elsewhere in this issue we explore innovative approaches to staff development and enquiry support, and offer top tips on how libraries can get the most out of Facebook.

As our friends at *The Guardian* would no doubt say, a full and exciting chapter.

Antony Brewerton  
SCONUL Focus Editorial Board

## NOTES

1. Rachel Cooke. Time to go into battle to save our world of books, *The Observer*, 22 March 2009, Review section, p. 6-8
2. Robert Booth. Books at Birmingham's heart as recession begins a new chapter for public libraries, *The Guardian*, 3 April 2009, p.17
3. Les Watson. The Saltire Centre at Glasgow Caledonian University, *SCONUL Focus*, 37, Spring 2006, p. 4-11, available at [www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/37/2.pdf](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/37/2.pdf)
4. Rachel Edwards. The Learning Grid at the University of Warwick: a library innovation to support learning in higher education, *SCONUL Focus*, 38, Summer/Autumn 2006, p. 4-7, available at [www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/38/2.pdf](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/38/2.pdf)
5. <http://www.designinglibraries.org.uk>

6. See, for example, Sheila Cannell. SCONUL Library Design Awards, *SCONUL Focus*, 42, Winter 2007, p. 92-94, available at [www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/42/32.pdf](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/42/32.pdf)

All Web sites accessed 10 May 2009