
Taking a dip into law at City University London

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The year 2012 saw a number of familiar buildings round London being adapted to accommodate various events of the Olympic Games: public buildings and spaces such as Horseguards Parade and Greenwich Park took on an unfamiliar sporting use. Meanwhile, at City University London, what was once a sporting facility – with an Olympic connection – was transformed into an academic library.

The university's origins lie in the foundation of the Northampton Institute in 1894. Sport was integral to the Institute at this time as its then Director of Education, Rudolph Oberholzer, laid the foundations for the British Olympic Gymnastics organisation. In 1896 a 30m swimming pool complete with spectator gallery was opened in the main building, and was used as a training facility for competitors in the 1908 Olympic Games. By the time of the 2012 games the pool was no longer there, but many of its original features remained and the training taking place was of a more academic nature: in April 2012, the university's law library took up temporary residence in the pool.

The original pool had its heyday between the wars, when it served as the only local public swimming pool, but its history was much chequered. In the 1920s it was effectively an open-air pool for a number of years after high condensation and rising chlorine gases caused the roof to collapse. Its replacement did not survive long either, as a German bomb landed on it; thankfully this did not do any further damage as by this time



The original swimming pool at City University

the pool was doubling up as a wartime ammunition storage facility.

In 1998 the pool was closed after glazing fell from the roof and other structural repairs – estimated at a cost of £500,000 – were deemed necessary. The university considered seeking lottery funding to restore the pool, but a devastating fire in May 2001 led to a change in the longer-term plan for the building. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the swimming pool was converted into a study area for the School of Arts.

Changes in the wider university estate, in particular the integration of one of our health sciences libraries into the main library at Northampton Square in summer 2012, meant that our academic law library, which serves 989 undergraduate and taught postgraduate students, was required to relocate to temporary premises as the building intended to house the School of Law (with two floors of dedicated library space) elsewhere on the campus would not be ready until January 2013.

RELOCATION CHALLENGES

An eight-week window was planned for the move of the law library collection to the pool, for the refurbishment of the law floor in the main library and for the integration of the health sciences library collection (approximately 15 000 books) – quite a task list. However, a number of factors conspired to rule out our preferred summer slot

for the full project and we had to do the move in two stages.

A two-week closure at the start of April was deemed the least disruptive option to move the law library into its temporary premises, but this presented a number of challenges as the busy revision period loomed before the end-of-session exams. The operational issues around uprooting an established library (the law library occupied one floor of the main university library) were numerous, and included a reduction in study spaces from over 150 to fewer than 80, reduced space for the collection and a schedule that would affect both existing and incoming students.

Law students by nature are very dependent on the library as a physical space, as they tend to work individually rather than in groups, with textbooks, journals and law reports around them. Self-regulating as a community, the law floor was always the quietest in the building.

There was a high possibility of some (quite rightly) very disgruntled students concerned about the upheaval during their revision period after Easter, so we planned carefully in order to ensure that they had as much support as possible in getting access to space and materials. We arranged for extra study spaces across the university to be available for the law school and we extended loan periods on books. Reference copies of in-demand texts were transported to our library for professional law students at Gray's Inn Place.

ARRANGEMENT OF THE LIBRARY COLLECTION

The pool as a space was difficult, not least because the large void under the floor meant that heavy bookshelves could only be placed around the outside of the space. There was substantially less room for our collection than in the main library.

The second challenge was that this listed space included the original changing cubicles, which had been converted to bookshelves. These looked gorgeous but they were of varying widths – 300, 400, 600 and 700 mm – which made it very difficult to plan which series would go where. There were also many random support columns to take into consideration.

Thirdly, the gallery above the pool, where spectators would once have gazed at athletes cutting through the water, could hold some stock, but extra supports had to be installed. Despite this, it would still not be able to bear the weight of more than one or two people, so this would be our closed collection available on a fetching service.

This meant the collection essentially needed to be split four ways: book stock, most popular journals and law reports on the ground floor of the pool, with the slightly less in-demand materials upstairs in the gallery. Some series would go into storage until our final move in December/January 2013 and the remainder would be withdrawn for disposal.



*Converted changing cubicle
The Law Library*

Planning what would go where was demanding: the varying shelf widths, along with the existence of duplicate copies of journals and law reports, made precise calculation necessary.

Politics

The previous occupants of the pool area had been students from the School of Arts; the room had doors at opposite ends into staff offices and



facilities, and upstairs an administrative office opened out onto the gallery. The library continued to be seen as a thoroughfare for staff going to get their coffee from the kitchen at the other side of the pool (often in chatting pairs). In addition, staff from upstairs would clatter down the spiral staircase. For students who like to study in silence this proved very difficult: these were academic staff causing disruption after all, not students. We managed to get a lock fitted to the top of the spiral staircase, which improved the environment a great deal.

WHAT'S NEXT?

In late December we expect to make our final move, ready to open in our new law building in early January 2013. Like many US law schools, the new City Law School building will encompass administrative and student space, academic offices and the library. Watch this space!