



67th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 16-25, 2001

Code Number: 124-169-E
Division Number: II
Professional Group: Art Libraries
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 169
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

Teaching students the art of retrieving architectural information

Karen Latimer

Deputy Science Librarian, Queens University Belfast
Belfast, Northern Ireland
E-mail: k.latimer@qub.ac.uk

Abstract:

This paper looks at the programme for educating architecture students at Queen's University in the art of information retrieval. The development of the programme through the undergraduate to postgraduate years is outlined. Particular emphasis is paid to the role the librarian plays in the 1st year project to research, and produce a model of, a seminal building and to the development of PADDI (Planning and Architecture Design Database Ireland) as a teaching tool for researching local architecture. The impact on library management is examined in relation to effective deployment of decreasing staff resources in the face of increasing student numbers; the raising of the profile of library staff within the Faculty; the more focussed allocation of budgets through involvement with course planning; and the development of new services arising from an improved awareness of student needs.

Introduction

There has been much debate in the UK during the last decade on the topic of architectural education and the professional institute, the Royal Institute of British Architects, has published a major report on the topic¹. The main issues under discussion relate to the length of the course, the balance between training professional architects and teaching general degrees in architecture and the core skills that should be taught. It is the last of these issues which is the concern of information professionals in general and this paper in particular.

There appears to be general consensus that architects need design, technical and interpersonal skills. Bryan Lawson², an external examiner at Queen's who has written widely on the design process, says that many forms of design deal with "both precise and vague ideas, call for systematic and chaotic thinking, need both imaginative thought and mechanical calculation." Observations on the nature of design have shown also that architects are heavily dependent on design concepts used to solve problems in the past when they come to solving problems they are currently facing. It follows, therefore, that they must learn to source and evaluate key precedent studies and retrieve information to stimulate and inspire as well as to provide specific detail to solve particular architectural problems. Like all other professionals, architects increasingly have to find their way through a vast morass of information and they need to know how to use the wide range of tools now available to retrieve such information. Nicol and Pilling³ in their recent book on architectural education and the changing nature of the profession, point out that architects "need expertise in accessing, identifying, evaluating and prioritising information." These are core skills that librarians should be instrumental in instilling.

There are two other major factors that impact on the need to teach architecture students how to retrieve information, and not just any information but material that is both relevant and of a high quality. The first of these factors is the increasing number of students in the UK being enrolled on architecture courses. In this we are just following a trend already well established in the rest of Europe. Ten years ago at Queen's, admittedly a small School of Architecture by UK standards, the total number of students enrolled in the undergraduate and postgraduate courses was 135 which is close to the number enrolled in the first undergraduate year in the current academic session. The total number of students enrolled in 2000/2001 was 315 and this number is set to increase. Even if library staff wanted to spoon-feed students it would not be possible. It is imperative that students learn to help themselves. Indeed learning seems to be the main buzzword in educational circles these days. Nicol and Pilling³ stress that students need to be led "from dependence to independence in learning." So self-help is not only necessary but also desirable.

User education at the School of Architecture Queen's University

The user education programme for architecture students at Queen's University is carefully structured and is very much a collaborative effort between library and academic staff. The programme is designed to ensure that students see information skills as relevant to current and future projects and to the work environment. An important consideration in planning the course is that the skills taught should be applied soon after they have been introduced so that students retain and adopt them.

Table 1 User Education Programme: QUB School of Architecture

Year of course	Title	Content
1 st Year UG	Design & Communication 1: introduction to library	Opening hours Loan periods Locations Catalogue Help desks
1 st Year UG	Building technology 1: library skills	Finding material Reading lists Short loan collections
1 st Year UG	Design & Communication 1: 20 th century house project	Key skills Use of reference material, catalogues, databases Retrieving and evaluating information
2 nd Year UG	Design & Communication 2: library skills	Refresher course Local information : PADDI
3 rd Year UG	Professional skills 3	Trade & technical information Office management
1 st Year PG	The dissertation: literature search techniques	Search methods Databases, Internet Printed sources, archives Citations, copyright

The course highlighted in this paper is the final library exercise for first year students which is completely integrated into a project to research a seminal building in the history of architecture and make a model of it. Students see retrieving information as an essential part of producing a very practical end product. They work in small groups and are assigned particular buildings to research such as the Farnsworth House, the Schroder House, Villa Savoie and others. At the end of the first week each group has to give a verbal presentation and submit a short report “ giving extensive information about the assigned villa, its architect, its context and the spatial and compositional features of the project.”⁴ For the end of week 2 they are asked to make a 1:50 card model of their assigned building with rough production drawings. Then finally at the end of week 3 each student presents a set of drawings at 1:50 scale including two floor plans, an elevation and an axonometric. One of the stated aims of the project, along with visual appreciation of good architecture and presenting critically another architect’s work, is developing library and information skills.

The Architecture Librarian gives two seminars with practical demonstrations and ample opportunity to ask questions. As well as finding out biographical details and historical information, students have to locate illustrations, plans and elevations. In the first talk students are taught how to approach their topic and how to check the library catalogue for relevant textbooks on their architect, building and historical period. They are introduced to key reference books such as specialised encyclopaedias and biographical dictionaries as well as to useful sources such as the slide collection. The emphasis in the second talk is on architectural databases such as APId and Avery, and on the Internet stressing the importance of gateways such as the RIBA’s Ribanet Links and Library Links and ADAM amongst others. As well as learning about the most useful retrieval tools available to them, students are taught how to evaluate references and how to compare sources qualitatively. After the talks students spend a supervised afternoon in the library

with staff on hand to help and advise. Key texts such as Dunster's *Key buildings of the twentieth century*⁵ are available on short loan for the duration of the project but there is plenty of scope for students to put their new found skills into practice and unearth additional material.

By the end of the project students are familiar with the library and the various collections of particular interest to architects. They know how to use the catalogue, which databases to use and how to construct simple searches. They even learn that the Internet is not the be all and end all but searched intelligently can offer up untold gold. Not least students and library staff interact in a positive and mutually beneficial way and the basis is laid for the development of skills that will be useful to students throughout their course and beyond. These skills are honed throughout the rest of the user education programme, which is carefully structured to build on the first year courses and culminates in a detailed series of lectures tied in to the dissertation that all students must write in the first postgraduate year of the architecture course.

The first year library exercise focuses on internationally famous buildings but during their course students are also asked to look closely at their local environment. Library and School of Architecture staff some years ago identified a problem in locating local information. Students could track down references without number on, for example, Foster's Hongkong and Shanghai Bank but when it came to finding out something about the bank on the street corner of their home town they could retrieve nothing. There was a paucity of material to start with and the problem was compounded by the fact that such material as there was did not feature hugely in existing national and international databases. Something needed to be done and it made sense to tackle co-operatively what was obviously going to be a large project.

The story of PADDI (Planning and Architecture Design Database Ireland) is really a talk in itself and has been told elsewhere (Latimer⁶) but I felt I could not pass up the opportunity of advertising it here in Boston, a city with such strong Irish connections. In the early 1990s the two main architecture and planning libraries in Ireland, those at Queen's University Belfast and at University College Dublin, joined forces to establish a database of references to material on all aspects of architecture and planning in Ireland north and south. The first phase of the project (which at that point went under the acronym IDEAL – Irish Database of Environmental and Architectural Literature) involved pooling resources and exchanging data, standardising entries and subject headings and agreeing a practical division of labour. The end result was two stand-alone databases that proved highly popular with staff and students at the parent institutions.

In 1999 we took the decision to widen access to the database by establishing it on the World Wide Web. Thanks to funding from the Research Support for Libraries Programme (RSLP) we were able to appoint staff and obtain equipment to turn proposal into practice. By this stage we had had to abandon the name IDEAL because Academic Press had launched their International Digital Electronic Access Library which had the same acronym. We had learnt our lesson, however, and our new name PADDI is now trademarked despite some initial opposition from the Professional Association of Divers International.

PADDI (<http://www.paddi.net>) provides searchers with references to books, parts of books, journal articles, theses and semi-published literature on Irish architecture. Students learn early on in their course that references to local architecture are limited on the international databases and also that much useful information is just too early in date to be included in them. PADDI is the obvious source for local information and has the added advantage of pointing our own students to material that is readily available to them. It has already proved invaluable as a first stop for students working on the many projects that involve either inserting a new building into an existing and often sensitive local area or simply require students to research a local architect, building, town or village. It is also a two way process because students often turn up relatively obscure but useful references that can then be added to the database.

Queries from students used to take up large amounts of staff time and involved a lot of repetitive one-to-one training. Since the user education programme as a structured course has become embedded in the curriculum at Queen's, the library staff (and it is hoped the academic staff and students) have seen a

number of improvements. Most obvious of these is that students have become much more self-sufficient during their course and enter the workplace with the necessary skills to research new projects and seek out relevant, high quality information when they need it as part of the design process. On a practical level as the number of students increases and the number of library staff either remains the same or even decreases, the advantage of having independent students who know their way around the library and the information tools available to them is self evident.

Integration of library courses within the academic course as a whole can only be achieved through a high degree of co-operation between lecturers and library staff. This has all sorts of added benefits from a management point of view in addition to the effective deployment of library staff mentioned above. The library staff has a high profile within the School and the Architecture Librarian attends staff meetings and has input where appropriate to course planning and content. This is particularly useful in ensuring that information skills are developed throughout the whole degree course and that library sessions are inserted into the curriculum at stages where they have the most impact.

Another benefit relates to the allocation of library budgets. As we all know, there is never enough money and it is much easier for librarians to allocate budgets fairly and effectively if they have a clear picture of the sort of information students will be looking for. This is particularly important in the field of architecture since the basis of architectural education is studio project work and there are very few set texts. Having copies of the reading lists for lecture courses is not enough to ensure adequate provision of material. Working along with the teaching staff helps to alert library staff to the gaps in the collections and to where there is a need for additional copies. Funds can therefore be more effectively targeted. In the case of the PADDI project discussed above, a gap of a different kind was identified. Library and academic staff realised that the teaching programmes were being hampered by the lack of a good finding tool for local information and so a whole new service came into existence.

There is nothing radically new in implementing library instruction courses in Schools of Architecture. We have all been doing this in some shape or form for years. What is becoming increasingly obvious, however, is that if such instruction is to be truly effective as part of the whole education process for architects, it must be integrated into courses at the planning stage and fully implemented into design projects not simply treated as an add-on. Students will only take information skills seriously and use them throughout their careers if they see them as really relevant to working practice. The benefits are considerable. Students acquire a key skill that will stand them in good stead whichever direction their careers take; academic staff gain from teaching students who can pick up on references discussed at the drawing board (or computer terminal) and independently research them further; library staff get to know exactly what is being taught and can provide support when and where it is really needed.

References

1. *Architecture education for the 21st century: RIBA review of architectural education*, chaired by Sir Colin Stansfield Smith. London, RIBA, 1999.
2. Lawson, B. *How designers think: the design process demystified*. 3rd ed. Oxford, Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997.
3. *Changing architectural education: towards a new professionalism*; edited by David Nicol and Simon Pilling. London, E & FN Spon, 2000.
4. Queen's University. School of Architecture. *Design and Communications 1 handout : twentieth century houses*. Unpublished.
5. Dunster, D. *Key buildings of the twentieth century*. 2v. London, Butterworth Architecture, 1990.
6. Latimer, K. The Irishness of Irish architectural information provision: the PADDI database. *Art Libraries Journal*, 25(3), 2000. pp. 25-28.