MY SPACE, I-SPACE

Behavioural scientists recognise that humans have a sociological and psychological need to establish territory while belonging to a greater whole. Their list of main factors affecting human interaction and effectiveness in carrying out any activity include the need for friendship and group membership, personal space, and territoriality. The exact boundaries of personal and group territory vary depending on the cultural inheritance, but the boundaries must have a clear definition and identity so that users feel safe, valued, and comfortable. For instance, personal space for school aged children is vastly different to seniors in rural area.

Creating different zones or territories and providing a variety of styles for seating (lounging, desk, high /low, etc) in a variety of seating arrangements such as personal or groups of various sizes, give library users choice that reflects their personal needs. For example, teenagers prefer 'sunken' type seating, while the elderly prefer more upright seats with arms with easy grip. Others may prefer a quiet, dark corner while others prefer to sit in the middle of an open plan area, or where 'the action is'. Temporary and permanent structures, materials, lighting levels, ceiling treatments, degrees of openness and enclosure, and various furniture arrangements are common ways of creating variety and defining zones. For instance, bright and uniform lighting can make the library look like a supermarket, while varying the level of lighting can assist in defining different activity areas.

Beyond making the choice that reflects personal needs and preferences, people seek to personalise their chosen space in the same way they personalise their mobile phone, tablet, or web browser; albeit in a more temporary way. The ability to alter their space, even in small ways such as level of lighting or moving furniture, fulfils part of the need for personalisation. For example, the use of desk lamps may help define personal territory by the cone of light created, and the ability to control the light may further assist in personalising that space. Likewise, many learning centres/commons have movable partitions or ceiling mounted curtains to re-define the boundaries of group space, with all furniture on wheels so the spaces can be rearranged to suit the dynamics of the group.

In the future, it will be possible to personalise space even further by blended immersive technologies that allow a whole space to change (colour, surrounding images, sound, etc). It may be possible to create your own forest environment in the middle of the library.

The spatial clues that define territories mentioned previously can sometimes restrict the very flexibility needed for personalisation. The design of each library has to strike its own balance. Work closely with your design team and stakeholders and develop planning options that explore user profiles, behaviours, and technologies (current and foreseeable future). By understanding your library's needs and required zones, you can design spaces that strike that balance.

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THINKING INSIDE THE BOX:
the library website as space

We are in the midst of a trend of revamping Australian academic library spaces to make them more user friendly. This trend has manifested as cafe-style booths, lounge spaces, single and group study spaces, and mood lighting. These changes can be valuable, provided they are user driven (a la Susan Gibbons), however they should be carried over into a neglected library space: the website.

In April 2013, 44% of visits to any Swinburne Library space were to the website; the website had nearly as many visitors as our busiest campus. Given that our occupancy is often over 100%, some counted visits represent students trying (and failing) to find a physical library space. Like many institutions, Swinburne is increasing its online service delivery; it is planned that by 2020, half of all courses will be delivered online. The library website is already an important component of the always-on, anywhere, anytime service our users demand, this is only likely to increase over time.

So what is the web equivalent of providing slick, cafe-style seating and using furnishings and lighting to create ambiance? How do we achieve this when the library website is an overlay for a range of bought-in tools (study guides, ILMS, journal aggregators, ebook publishers, etc), each with their own interfaces and requirements for use? The first step is to treat library websites as an important space for user interaction in their own right. Like the limitations of physical space, the requirements of institutional style-guides and bought-in software limit what can be done with a website, however this should not discourage any attempt at improvement. One strategy for improving the website is to consider end-users in software purchasing decisions, another is to put pressure on vendors for usable and customisable software (customisation allows for a seamless library experience). Just as architects and interior designers work within the constraints of physical spaces, information architects, user-experience professionals, and visual designers work within the constraints of websites (though I should declare my interest here: I am a user experience architect working in an academic library). Finally, like physical spaces work better if they are designed for their primary purpose (at Swinburne library visitors report mostly visiting to study), knowing what users want from your website (to find information, in Swinburne's case) can help drive design. With tools such as Google Analytics and ILMS logging software, understanding our users' behaviour on our websites is more possible than ever before.

Library websites can allow us to provide users with services in ways simply impossible in the physical world: they have as much space as users could possibly need, they can be very searchable, and they are open all the time. They also capture nearly half of our audience, at least at Swinburne. We need to start thinking about the other library space: is it usable? Does it meet users' needs? Does it work on all kinds of browsers and devices? Answering these questions is key to addressing the final frontier in library space: the space inside the box.

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