An extract from: 'Better Learning and Library Space'

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Furniture Fit to the Future
A brief exploration of library and learning furniture today and for the coming generation.

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From a furniture designer's perspective this article endeavours to understand the trends driving library and learning spaces forward and explores how furniture may evolve to facilitate this journey.

The advance of technology has led us all a merry dance over the last thirty years. In 1983 I rang people on my telephone - it is now 2013 and my smart phone sits on the desk beside me. On last count this clever, potent machine has replaced no less than forty-five products and services in my life. Irrefutably, technology's rapid rate of change promises to dramatically influence the furniture used in library and learning spaces.

Let us focus on the furniture we currently use and consider where this may lead in the coming generation. To put our investigation in context let us underpin it with three simple ideas:

• Furniture is for people. For the most part people need somewhere to put themselves (typically a seat) and somewhere to put things (shelves) and do things (worktops). Good furniture is about 'people fit.'

• Change is certain, and great flexibility in library and learning furniture is absolutely key to future-proofing.

• People will always seek social context in community hubs and they will always need to learn. The future of libraries and learning facilities is assured though their forms will continue to transform.

Staff versus the machine
Recent surveys indicate that for many library users interaction with staff remains an important component of their library visit (1). Apart from offering practical assistance librarians are people helping people and providing important social context - there is no replacement for a welcoming smile. Though libraries will undergo continuing automation staff/member interaction will remain an important part of library life and furniture will continue to be needed to support this.

Front of house minimised

We are in the midst of a general trend to break down the barriers in search of enhanced customer experience. This has been supported by the move to customer self service models, including issues, returns and reserves which make the old style circulation counter (we call them fortresses) increasingly redundant. The replacement is the standalone help point positioned at the entrance and key locations throughout the library and used in tandem with staff roaming models; preferably these staff stations are mobile and height adjustable, enabling use while seated or standing. Though some argue that roaming models require no furniture at all it is our observation that people need a 'place' to return to and therefore the staff station in some form will remain.


Future front of house will utilise staff stations equipped with powerful interactive digital worktops. (Copyright Cie Ltd 2013)

In diagram 1 we envisage a front of house thirty years from now, featuring help points where the tablets of the future are still carried by staff and customers, and thanks to the potential of rock star materials like graphene (2) the whole staff station desktop is now a powerful interactive screen. Couple this with voice activation and emerging gesture control technologies (like Leap Motion (3) or Samsung's promised eye activated scrolling) and our voices, eye movements and gestures have become the interface, making the mouse, keyboard and even touch screens obsolete. Design of the help point is still centred on the 'people fit'; seated to standing adjustment continues to be essential, and because the need to respond to change remains critical the workstation is still mobile. Today we need power points to recharge dead devices; in our scenario there is now a wireless power pad incorporated in the desktop (4). Elsewhere in our future front of house, we suggest customer book processing kiosks have now disappeared, made redundant by

automated management systems, though books, and therefore the returns slot, still remain.

Managing your total library experience
While for some members interaction with staff remains important, recent surveys also indicate people are becoming increasingly happy and able to manage their own library experience (5).
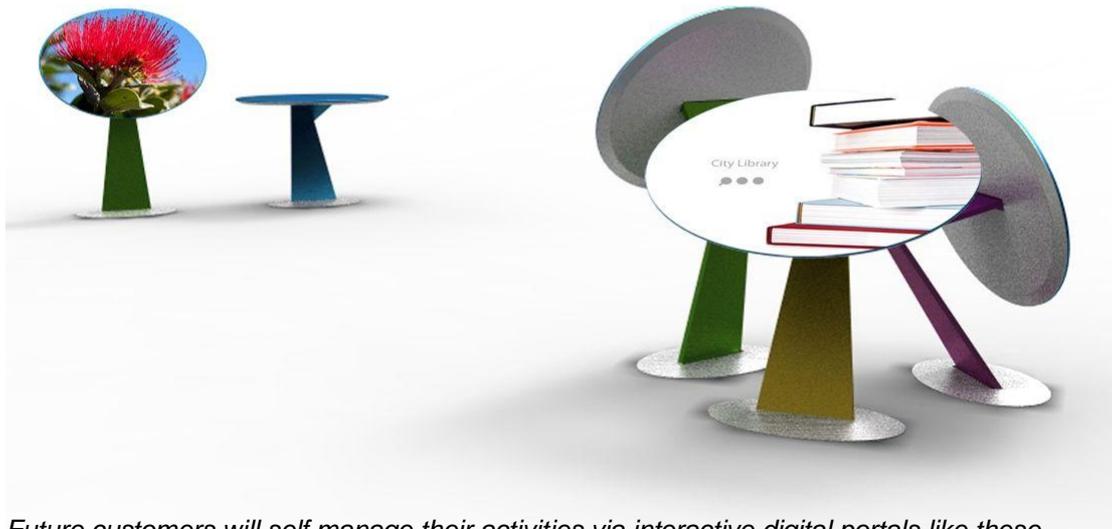
Future customers will self manage their activities via interactive digital portals like these kiosks deployed throughout the space. (Copyright Cie Ltd 2013)

In diagram 2 we focus on this self help aspect in a generation's time whereby the same help points shown in diagram 1 are also available for direct use by the customer. This will offer via its 'magic pool' tabletop a powerful interactive portal to library activities, resources and the customer's personal account. Such help points will be deployed throughout the library and could even be integrated into library tables or other pieces of furniture. A step further and interactive holographic technology may allow us to say goodbye to the screen forever.

Flexibility
Furniture deployed in library spaces must support high flexibility. As libraries offer increasingly more diverse programmes the theatre analogy seems to fit very well as spaces become stages and furniture the props responding to each production and change of scene. The highly successful Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library in the UK demonstrates the need to be light on ones feet by providing versatile furniture able to support diverse activities which include craft sessions for kids, knit and natter circles and board game afternoons. Worcester's Hive (see case study in Chapter 1) takes this priority for flexible furniture one step further, combining the diverse needs of public and university libraries under one roof. For some years now the question 'how else might this item be used' has been at the forefront of library designers' creative thinking.

Tables and chairs

Tables and chairs have been present in libraries since libraries began. They will always be there because the 'people fit' encompasses the fundamental need to sit down and put things they wish to interact with in front of them at a comfortable height. In today's library, tables have adapted to a variety of purposes other than reading and writing, notably supporting devices like computers and audio/visual equipment. Tables are now often mounted on castors and incorporate tilt tops for ease of moving and storing. The traditional rectangular table-top is now complimented by a myriad of shapes, including round, oval and teardrop to ensure the best functional fit for the space.

Library tables themselves may become the e readers of the future. Mobile space dividers may also act as data shows providing information access and ambiance. (Copyright Cie Ltd 2013)

We suggest in diagram 3 that in the library of the future, devices mounted on tables will diminish, (for example, we are already seeing PC numbers in libraries drop), and we may find ourselves sitting down reading the table itself as interactive screen technologies take over the whole tabletop. Newspaper and magazine resources are a deployment challenge for librarians. Already we are seeing libraries providing access to some titles only via iPads (6). Predictably the digital trend will continue and with tabletop sized screens the cyber newspaper may be opened fully and comfortably perused – perhaps with pages turned at the blink of an eye.

Love to lounge

Providing welcome havens in a busy world, lounge areas are quite rightly expected in today's library-scape; they are our community living-rooms. Typically such areas are populated by various soft seating options such as tub chairs, sofas and ottomans, which are usually augmented by coffee tables. In recent years, customers have started to bring their own devices to the library; consequently new elements have appeared like portable laptop tables.

Lounge areas encourage connective social experience and, particularly in tertiary libraries, support informal learning interaction. The fact that many lounge chairs in use today are derivatives of designs from as far back an the 1930's suggests that lounge areas are unlikely to change significantly in the next 30 years; we will however see more integrated technology. In today's library we find chairs mounting power outlets and chairs designed for gaming or as listening posts. In the future such chairs may support 3D holographic interactions and experiences.

My space your space

Space division is an important component in encouraging personal or group activities and achieving efficient space utilisation. Spontaneous space division is typically achieved using sound absorbing mobile screens, which often double as pin boards or white boards. In larger spaces, human nature being what it is, people will first populate the corners of the room, then line the walls and only when these spaces are full spread into the centre of the room. By deploying mobile screens to create spontaneous zones spaces are better utilised; people are more comfortable when their space is defined, a human attribute unlikely to change in the future. Diagram 3 shows a mobile space divider of the future also acting as a data show for providing information access and even ambiance; convert your reading room into a tropical paradise.

Display

Good display gets products noticed and makes them easily accessible. With the move to digital, many physical library products will disappear including CDs, DVDs and potentially a large percentage of books, newspapers and magazines. Regardless of whether a product is physical or digital the principles of good display will remain valid and relevant for libraries. Theme displays, focus displays and face display will continue to 'dress' library spaces, enriching the user experience. Thus the familiar display stands will remain useful but products and services will increasingly be promoted via digital media, such as promotions on 'billboards' mounted throughout the library.

Kids are the future

In our travels we have seen much creative work in children and youth zones. Story time areas where the adults can comfortably fit too, hidey holes, imaginatively themed kiddy furniture and increasingly the introduction of iPad and touch screen based activities. Appropriately New Zealand's new 'Super City' of Auckland, created from the amalgamation of several councils, now has fifty-five libraries and cites their commitment to children and young people as the top priority of their ten year plan (7). Kids love knowing that this is their special place; they love to roll around on the floor, to reach things and do things for themselves. Libraries can play a key role in developing children's knowledge and creativity. Exploring furniture designs that 'understand' kids will greatly assist libraries to make the most of this opportunity. Life is a serious game; keep creative - they are worth it.

Learning Spaces

As technology revolutionises the way we learn exciting new ideas like MOOCs are being trialed and models around lifelong learning pursued (8). Whatever the outcomes it remains likely that getting together in groups will remain an important component of learning, and the spaces and furniture used will need to be highly adaptive. Work tables are now designed around the optimum learning group size (typically comprising three people). Ideally they are easy to store and deploy, with the ability to link to other tables and enable teachers to work naturally with individuals, groups or multiple groups. Technology is focused on access, capture and sharing, currently utilising whiteboards, data shows and projectors, all of which will eventually give way to interactive digital walls and surfaces. In diagram 4 we take a glimpse at learning space furniture a generation from now.
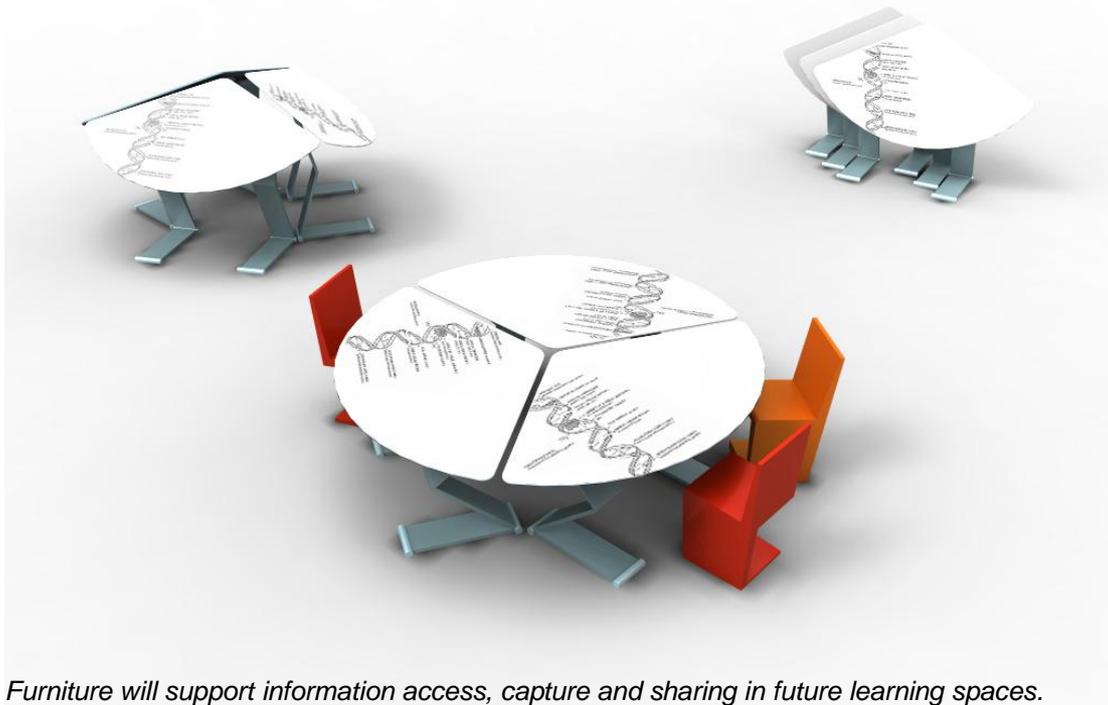
Furniture will support information access, capture and sharing in future learning spaces.
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Focus Space
When work needs to be done focus space for individuals and small groups is important. Of late high back chairs, mobile screens and 'diner booths' have arrived to complement the traditional study carrel and meeting room. We will see much more experimentation with furniture design in this area as learning theory evolves. For example the 'birdnests' in use at Coventry University's Hub in the UK where round low walled enclosures, complete with bean bags and plenty of power outlets, provide popular hang outs for students to gather.

Outside – the unexplored asset
Of course the weather does not always co-operate but library and learning facilities often include wonderful outdoor areas. These are inevitably populated with traditional park benching and often supported by reasonable WIFI cover. There is great potential to better utilise these spaces with well

designed outdoor furniture, which creatively addresses comfort, community and cover; watch this space.

So where to from here?
For library and learning institutions in the coming generation the challenge is not just to survive in a continually changing world, but to use new technology and ideas to maximize their relevance to the communities they serve. Furniture design is responding to provide the 'objects for living' the staff and visitors will require and we are seeing many fresh ideas arriving on the scene. Inevitably we can look forward to a highly automised technology rich future; nevertheless successful furniture for library and learning spaces will continue to focus on the 'people fit'.

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Authors profile
Paul White is an industrial designer and creative director at Instinct Furniture an Australasian based company focused on developing furniture for libraries and learning spaces.