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Towards a Rhizomatic library

Michel Erler and Carlotta Solari, graduates from BA (Hons) Interaction Design Arts, class of 2016, London College of Communication

Abstract

In this article Erler and Solari discuss their project 'Towards a Rhizomatic Library'. Whilst on the third year of BA (Hons) Interaction Design Arts at London College of Communication (UAL), these students' interest in libraries developed, having been initially prompted by an earlier assignment brief, set in Year 2 of their course. This article describes their spatial experiments in the LCC Library; a workshop with fellow students; and research into the ways that libraries are structured, discussing how they have mapped students' movement through and engagement with these spaces.

Keywords

rhizome; dynamic library; mapping; design; collaboration; strategic design; interaction design; Deleuze

Introduction

Towards a Rhizomatic Library is a collaborative project and on-going investigation into the world of libraries as spaces. It considers their affordances, their users, how they are perceived and other factors associated with these settings. Conceived in a playful manner, we initially approached this project with the intention of conceptually de- and re- constructing the library at London College of Communication (UAL) through a series of experiments and interventions. The aim was to trigger wider discussions about the perception and uses of libraries, especially ones used in teaching art and design.

The project developed from a collaborative brief that was assigned to second year students on the BA (Hons) Interaction Design Arts and BA (Hons) Game Design at LCC in February 2015. The brief asked us to explore spaces around the college from a different perspective and develop a game designed for that location. We decided to explore the calmest and most silent area of the college. For our game players were encouraged to find hidden cards with different words written on them and 'point cards' that were scattered in the library. The objective was to find as many cards as possible and use these words to create sentences. The librarians were very open-minded about the intervention, so this game marked the start of an on-going conversation with Leila Kassir, Ruth Collingwood and Richenda Gwilt from the [LCC Library](#).



Figure 1: Information leaflet used during the 'String Installation'. Photo: Eler and Solari (2016).

Following the end of the original collaborative assignment in March 2015, we developed this topic further. Our project questions the preconceptions associated with the LCC Library, asking how the 'idea' of the library relates to the reality of this space. We began by gathering a broad range of questions and ideas. What is the library? What is an arts library? A library is not a neutral space. It is a space full of meaning and meaning-making and the project asks how students can be encouraged to make links between the theory housed within this space and the artistic practices to which they are connected, exploring ideas between research and creativity. How can students be engaged in reading and research? How can the nature of browsing and searching be embraced? Libraries provide access to 'leftfield' information and resources that enable design and artistic practice to be linked to and inspired by other disciplines, literature, sound art, architecture or the psycho-geography (Debord, 1955) of this space.

Ways of mapping

There is an interesting tension between the serendipity of searching for information and the principles of classification and organisation that order libraries. In response, our project started to explore the idea of using the library in a non-library way, as an attempt to move away from the focused search that typifies user interaction. Having heard that the librarians were planning to design a map of the library, we became interested in the idea of creating a conceptual map as opposed to a traditional navigational one.

The LCC Library is organised using the Dewey Decimal Classification System (Dewey Decimal System or DDS) as a means of mapping knowledge and topics. The many hundreds of categories and subcategories of this system were of particular interest to us as we tried to connect the different parts and sections of the library spatially and conceptually. We were interested in challenging that system, as it is far from perfect. The project asked questions about how one categorises books, knowledge and thoughts. How might we explore the overlapping spaces of these categories?



Figure 2: Project development – mapping connected items across the grid system of the library. Photo: Erler and Solari (2016).

In order to address these questions, we found Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the 'Rhizome' (1987) to be particularly relevant. The rhizome, a term originally used in botany to describe horizontally growing roots, has become a metaphor: Deleuze and Guattari propose a horizontal and networked image of knowledge production, providing a radically different perspective to the rigid verticality of the Dewey Decimal System. In an attempt to trace and map networks of books – publications with similar themes, texts that influenced one another, readings that provoked a counterpart and so forth – we read a great deal and researched their historical context. This led to us creating our own network, which integrated individual books as 'nodes': points of intersection for common themes, subjects, influences etc.

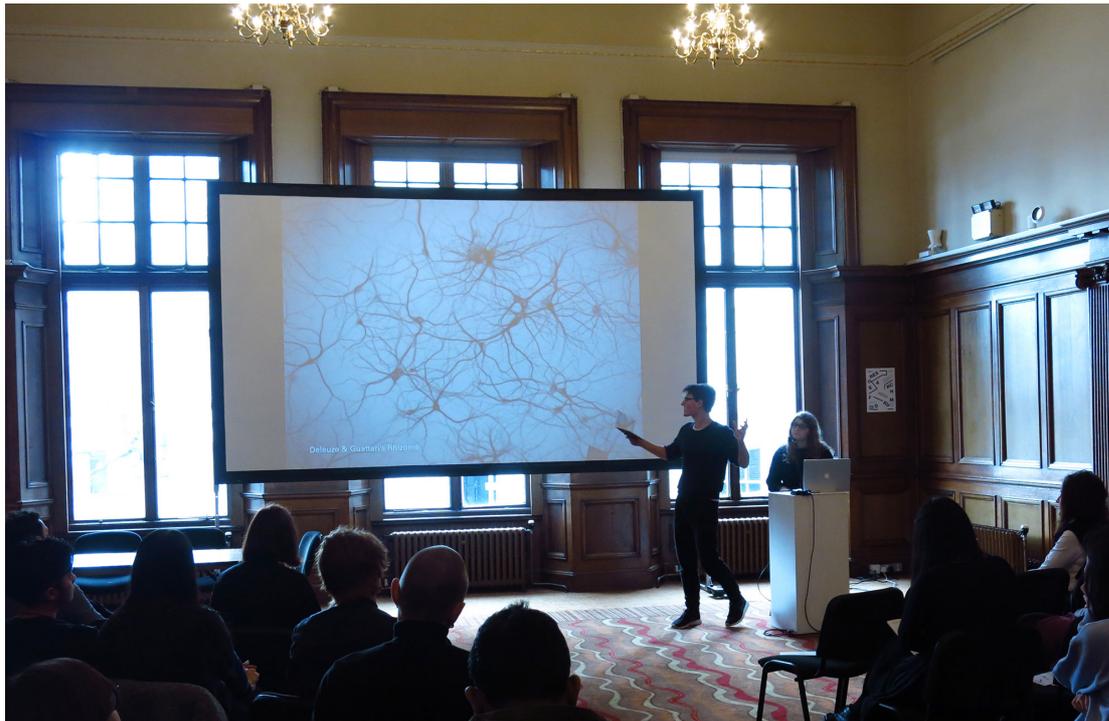


Figure 3: Our research in development – talking about ‘Rhizomes’ in a presentation on ‘Library walks – connecting knowledge’, *UAL Undergraduate Research Forum* at Chelsea College of Arts (March 2016). Photo: Bataille (2016).

While attempting to conceptually connect the different items housed within the library we were aware of the danger presented by following an algorithmic ‘filter-bubble’ way of thinking; similar to those that trace whether ‘customers who bought this also bought that’. In our view this approach to mapping creates closed systems of knowledge. The prospect of not being exposed to contrary opinions is a worrying potential development, which could be counter-productive for individuals and society. A networked library is a way of introducing users and visitors to information and knowledge that is contrary to their own, allowing them to search across societies and over multiple specialisms.

Whilst researching library mapping, we discovered the [Sitterwerk Library](#), an art and design collection based near St. Gallen in Switzerland. Our eyes were opened by reading a collection of essays on *The Dynamic Library: Organizing Knowledge at the Sitterwerk – Precedents and Possibilities* ([Roth and Schütz, 2015](#)), which revealed a number of insights, inspiring us to explore new possibilities.



Figure 4: Image of the Sitterwerk Art Library (near St. Gallen, Switzerland). Photo: Deér (2016).

The Sitterwerk Library is a 'dynamic library' where researchers and visitors are invited to make the space their own and model it to their needs. Many libraries use Radio-frequency identification (RFID), a wireless system that attaches chips to objects that act as 'tags' and allow information to be stored electronically. The Sitterwerk Library cleverly uses RFID chips and readers to their full potential. Researchers are encouraged to use bookshelves to their advantage and place books wherever it is most convenient. Many of them opt to keep all the books they are using next to one another. The Sitterwerk RFID reader scans the shelves continuously and updates the library's online catalogue with the whereabouts of each book. Another one of their initiatives is the 'Bibliozone' project, which aims to create a stronger link between the library's book collection and its 'Material Archive'. Bibliozone is an electronic work table equipped with RFID antennas and cameras that allows users to compile lists of content from both the Sitterwerk's Art Library and their separate Material Archive. The work table recognises and remembers what is on it and allows users to add notes (Sitterwerk, 2016). Researchers can compare their research with that of others, which can then be printed and bound in the form of a booklet, RFID-ed and added to the library collection catalogue. Sitterwerk also holds workshops with researchers and visitors on how to improve the library. For example, one of their workshops focused on finding ways of bringing together books from the Art Library and materials from the Material Archive. One of these workshop groups came up with the idea of using elastic bands to tie related materials to books, thus creating a more haptic experience for users. This tactile connection directly influenced our first experiment in the LCC Library.

A strategic design intervention – the String Experiment

After a conversation with [Dr Mark Ingham](#), LCC's Acting Programme Director and Coordinator of Contextual and Theoretical Studies (CTS), we reframed our project. Rather than producing a 'perfect' fully formed piece of new media work we felt that a more participatory approach was required. We were not only interested in the objects, services and spaces of the library, but also the cultural policies

and other forms of context connected with it. This wider engagement relates to our practice as designers. Designer and urbanist [Dan Hill](#) (also Associate Director of the design consultancy Arup), observes that traditional approaches to knowledge can be challenged by using 'Strategic Design' in his book *Dark Matter and Trojan Horses: A Strategic Design Vocabulary* ([2012](#)).

Strategic design tries to ally pragmatism with imagination, deliver research through prototyping, enable learning from execution, pursue communication through tangible projects, and balance strategic intent [...] with iterative action, systems thinking and user-centredness (Hill, 2012, p.168).

Taking inspiration from this description, we adopted a more experimental, playful and participative approach to our investigation.

The first manifestation of this Strategic Design methodology was the 'String Experiment' in April 2016. The idea was simple, to track and recreate students' journeys through the library using string. Each length of string is connected to the places at which a student stops when looking at or using something in the LCC Library, making visible their quiet and fleeting movements in a place of knowledge (see Video 1 below). We saw it as a first move – a way to metaphorically shake things up in the library – and more importantly as a means of getting other students involved. We photographed a mini-prototype route – connecting books we had recently borrowed with a small amount of string – and sent these photos to the librarians as a proposal for realising this movement mapping on a larger scale. After discussing our plan of action and talking through the practical details of our installation the librarians were on board. Their positive responses and cooperation were extremely valuable and encouraging in realising the experiment.

In order to collect data about student behaviour in the library, we stood outside the doors of the silent zone. Having prepared sets of numbered, colour and symbol coded Post-it notes we stopped students and gave them each a different set, asking them to stick a Post-it wherever they stopped to look at or use something within the silent zone. We then recorded the location of the Post-its on 2D maps of this space alongside other relevant information, such as the precise book's DDS number. Having also created a 3D model of the library, we used thin thread to map some of these walks. The model was useful for explaining our vision to students, as well as those who volunteered to help with putting up the installation. Visitors could immerse themselves in the haptic installation, but also have a more detached and informative view of it as we also displayed our model in the library.



Figure 5: Image of the 3D model of the silent zone in the LCC Library. Photo: Eler and Solari (2016).

On the day of the experiment we met our team of helpers outside the library and explained what their tasks were. The team worked silently and had it not been for the bright neon-green colour of the string, we might have gone unnoticed. The installation was put up in the morning and taken down in the evening. During the day we spent some time in the library, answering questions from curious students. It was interesting to observe students moving around the strings, each of which represented yet another person.

Workshop – ‘Reimagining the library’

Following the String Experiment we were keen to involve more students and soon organised a two-hour workshop for first and second year students on the BA (Hons) Interaction Design Arts (IDA) course at LCC. After a short introduction that provided a contextual framing of topics – such as the closure of public libraries throughout the UK, LCC’s future move to a new building and the potential for libraries to be maker spaces – the workshop was structured around three exercises.



Figure 6: Image of the 'Re-imagining the Library' workshop session, held at LCC (Friday 29 April 2016). Photo: Erler and Solari (2016).

For the first exercise on '(Un)classifying', we asked fellow students to think of different ways of classifying books and artefacts. As an introduction to this topic, we discussed the ways in which some independent bookshops classify their books and how we arrange ours at home. Divided into groups of two, the students were given 10 minutes to come up with new ways of classifying books. They were encouraged to think outside of the box and not necessarily in practical ways. They were given 10 books and one DVD, which they organised according to their new classification systems. At the end of 10 minutes, each group presented their three favourite ideas. The groups were encouraged to give constructive feedback and challenge these newly proposed classification systems. Among the results, there was an idea that classified books by emotions and another based on how far into a book a student read before putting it back on the shelf. Some of these approaches might be described as unrealistic, however, discussing our results with Richenda Gwilt from the LCC library, she pointed out an outsider's perspective is important.

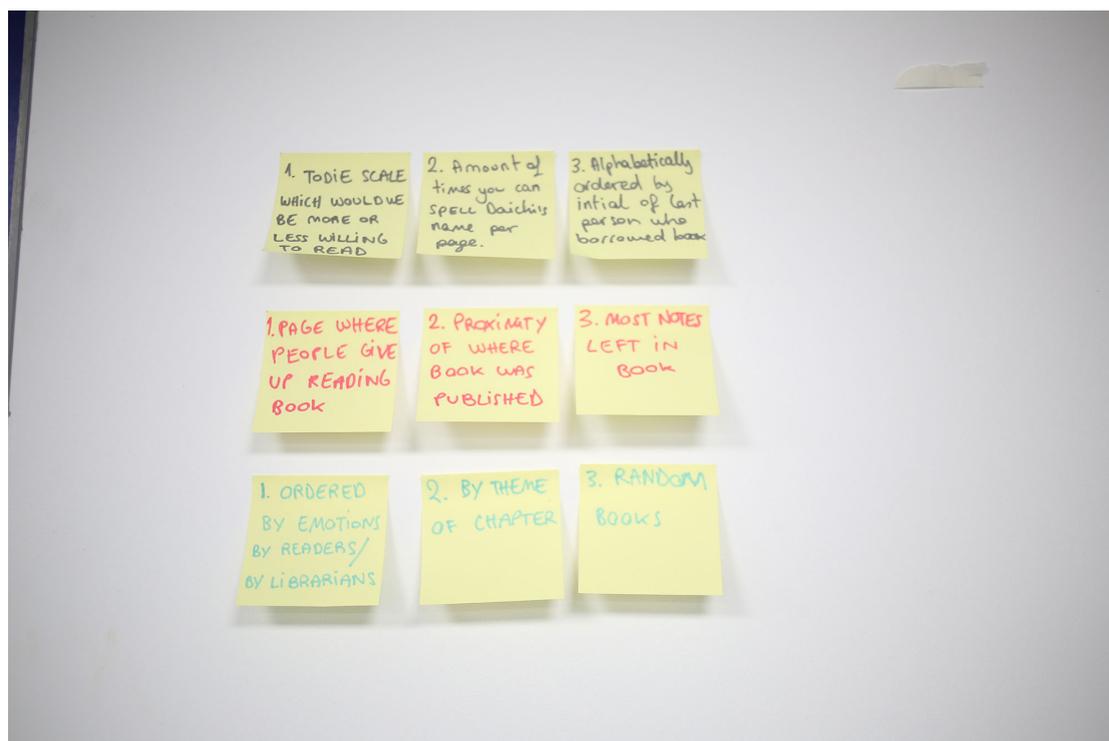


Figure 7: Examples of classification systems devised during the (Un)classifying exercise of the Reimagining the Library workshop. Photo: Eler and Solari (2016).

For the second exercise entitled 'Shelfless', we asked participants to imagine a world without shelves. How could a library be physically organised in such a world? Students had 5 minutes to (individually) sketch as many ideas as they could. The aim of this exercise was to encourage fast thinking outside the box and to allow students to be as creative as they wished.

Finally, we used the third exercise as an opportunity to find out what the students' 'dream library' would look like. As a starting point, we prepared little cards displaying different keywords. These words – including 'forest', 'conveyor belt' or 'water fountain' – could be applied in a literal or metaphorical way. After 30 minutes of sketching out ideas the students, who had been divided into two groups, presented their dream libraries back to the whole group. We were surprised that both had created a vertically structured underground library, something associated with a hierarchical image of knowledge. However, one group's method of navigating through the library was more unconventional and made use of a 'microphone of knowledge' which would be used to ask questions on where to find content. One example focused on the atmosphere and whether it was conducive to study, dedicating an entire floor to a bar and including activity-based work zones such as a 'fiction section' and a 'dissertation section', as well as a rooftop garden.

Conclusion

During the course of this project we have received overwhelmingly positive reactions from librarians and staff within UAL. This supportive atmosphere has strengthened our belief in the library as an important space for action. In future we would be interested to see how students from different courses react to the questions we have been addressing within this project and gather feedback from other types of users relating to public libraries.

Throughout the development of this project, we have presented our ideas to others. These on-going conversations started with our presentation at the *UAL Undergraduate Research Forum* (see Figure 3, Chelsea College of Arts, March 2016) before presenting the project in a more complete form at the

Thesis InForm Symposium (LCC, June 2016). Presenting our work to fellow students and members of staff has taught us the importance of sharing one's discoveries and ideas as a means of developing concepts and a way of allowing the project to grow. As students, we immensely valued that projects like these were not only part of our university degree, but were first and foremost interest-led projects with a personal connection.

In retrospect, our workshop with fellow IDA students was a good test-run for future activities, in a familiar environment. Organising and running a workshop has been a valuable experience and enabled us to compare our own ideas of what a library can be with that of fellow students and balancing our research in the area. It was also good to practise participative design methodologies which will be helpful for all sorts of design projects in the future.

We believe that LCC's move to a new building in Elephant and Castle, which is scheduled for around 2021, presents the perfect opportunity for creating a dynamic library space that will allow and encourage experiments and more participatory activities better suited to an art and design college environment. The insights gathered through this research present a valuable resource and could potentially help contribute towards this new library.

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Biographies

[Michel Erler](#) and [Carlotta Solari](#) are recent graduates from BA (Hons) Interaction Design Arts at London College of Communication (UAL).