“Should I stay or should I go?”: Conflicting Environment-Behaviour-Settings in Libraries.

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The creation of library spaces is mostly undertaken with considerable contemplation and planning of the desired effect the built environment should have on its visitors or users. It is, thus, all the more frustrating and irritating when this desired behaviour does not occur, or even manifests in a contradictory manner. An area might, for example, be specifically designed for quiet study. Why, then, do users repeatedly sit there to loudly exchange ideas in a group? The answer lies in conflicting environment-behaviour-settings.

Environment-behaviour-settings describe environmental situations specifically designed to induce a particular behaviour and its variations – so-called ‘patterns of behaviour-and-milieu’ (Barker, 1968). The basic premise builds on the assumption of a correlation between human behaviour and the built environment it occurs in. However, in spite of good planning, such settings may contain inherently conflicting designs that cause users to fail to identify the preferred behaviour. They have no idea if what they want to do is what they are allowed to do, or if they should move to another place to do it.

In the following paper I will be illustrating situations of conflicting environment-behaviour-settings with examples from different university libraries in Europe. These examples were initially collected in the context of a comparative case study (2008–2014) and supplemented in the following years on several occasions. They are not meant as finger pointing at particular libraries or as a judgement; the material is chosen because it properly makes contradictions in the settings visible and therefore enables us to learn about patterns of environment and behaviour.

The focus lies on two typical dimensions of behaviour for which the settings may be presented in a conflicting manner: library spaces that vary in the desired level of loudness (silence vs. whispering vs. talking), as well as in the intended

1 The Clash, 1981.
social setting (individual vs. collaborative learning). The aim is twofold: first, to sensitize to environment-behaviour-settings in general and to the challenge of providing consistent learning and working spaces in particular; second, to encourage librarians to develop an eye for details in library spaces by observing users and by thinking about their behaviour, especially when it occurs in unexpected ways. This will highlight contradictions in the environment-behaviour-settings and therefore help to design spaces that are more comprehensible – and, thus, more inclusive.

Decoding the library black box

In 2014 I was visiting the vonRoll Library at the University of Bern, Switzerland. While we were looking through the window down to the main reading room (Figure 1), myself and my host were discussing the following observation: In the evenings, when students are leaving the reading room they usually do not switch off their desk lamps. A staff member has to go through the rows of tables and switch off most of the lamps every day. It seems that students do not feel responsible for that. This situation is what I call a ‘black box’ of environment-behaviour-settings:

![Figure 1](University Library Bern, vonRoll Library, 2016.)
a particular behaviour within an environmental setting that does not match our expectations. Following Bruno Latour (2005) we have to decode this black box to find out which are the social components that are embedded in the built environment. To use a non-library example: the presence of a hump on a street. A driver of a vehicle may be thinking about how it makes him/her slow down or about his/her shock absorbers, but the embedded social component is the slowing down of vehicles for the safety of the children at the nearby kindergarten. Back to the reading room desk lamps at the vonRoll Library. There is a young lady sitting at the first table row on the left hand side. Imagine you are this lady and you want to switch on the light. Which lamp would you use? Here is the difficulty: you have the possibility to switch on two different lamps, the one on your left or the one on your right, but some other people will be affected. So you have two options: either you do not care about whether the others feel comfortable with more light, or you flout rule number one of a library – you break the silence to ask if it will be okay to switch on the light.

This reading room is characterised by two conflicting environment-behaviour-settings. The room is furnished and socially structured as a quiet reading area with working places for individual learning. But the lamps are positioned as in group working areas where people learn together and sit together at a desk with a shared lamp. Because there are not individual lamps, the effect is that no one feels responsible. It may be the case that the last person leaving the table may not have switched on the light so he/she does not feel responsible. Whereas a student who may have switched on the light does feel responsible but does not want to interrupt all the others at the table when he or she is leaving.

This situation illustrates that a mismatch of expected and occurred behaviour is a source of awareness and findings. Every time when we become aware of such black boxes for which we cannot explain why the people behave contradictory to the requested way, it may be fruitful to have a closer look at the setting. You can achieve this with different methods.

**Empirical approach and set of data**

As mentioned above, I conducted a comparative case study spanning several European countries. In this case study and the following data collection I used a triangulative research design, combining reactive and non-reactive methods because environment-behaviour-settings and the related user experience are not
easy to express verbally in interviews or similar methods. Reactive methods, such as interviews or mental maps, can provide insights into the everyday usage of particular library spaces. They can tell you something about why users prefer these spaces, and how they act and feel. My set of data includes about 150 hours of participant observation, 9 expert interviews, 13 user interviews, and 40 mental maps, as well as group discussions, focus groups, floor plans, maps, aerial views and photographs (see Edinger (2014) for a detailed discussion of my empirical approach).

Noise vs. silence

There are a few obvious examples of environment-behaviour-settings in libraries, such as the one of Codrington Library in Oxford (Figure 2). It is a very traditional library, not being open to the public, with single desks so far away from each other that it is not possible to whisper from one user to another. The material and social structure is the one of a panopticon because all desks are directed to the middle of the room. Every user is under visual control of all the other users and at the same time a controller of all others. (Foucault (1975) would call situations like this ‘parcellation’.) Codrington Library is a place for silent, individual working.

Figure 2 Codrington Library, Oxford, 2010.
But often it is not clear at all which behaviour is requested. Normally we would expect libraries to be more or less silent places. So let us have a closer look at the pictures in Figure 3:

Figure 3
(Right) University Library Constance, 2010.
(Below left) Hochschule der Medien, Stuttgart, 2018.
(Below right) University Library Bern, 2013.

The irritating detail on all three pictures is the earplug dispenser. It signals that it may be noisy here on a regular basis – so if you expect quiet working you have to help yourself to earplugs. The interesting pattern is that all three pictures show areas
where working spaces and transit areas like staircases or corridors are positioned next to each other without any separation or noise prevention. However, staircases are places to meet and greet, somewhere to stop for a chat (see Figure 4).

A corridor through a library stack area can be designed either as a navigational route or as an area for studying. In the University Library in Constance, a new building for the Law section was added to the library complex and a 'path' through several working areas was designed by integrating a red carpet (what a metaphor!) leading to the Law section building. It is not surprising that students chat and laugh at a normal volume when they are on their way to the Law section, disturbing all the people at the nearby working places because they predominantly perceive the environmental setting as a transfer area.

Individual vs. collaborative working spaces

The vonRoll Library Bern and the Codrington Library in Oxford are two contradictory individual working spaces. People like to work in reading rooms, because it is the social structure of a professional working place with social control:
I was able to work for more hours at a stretch because other people would see if I was getting, like, if I were surfing the internet or doing whatever or getting disrupted and sort of that knowledge that other people would notice made me more keen” (interview with a Masters student, Oxford, 2010).

But there is a thin line between social control and privacy in individual working spaces:

And it's just a little bit weird I think … to be sitting for hours next to someone in total silence … who you don't know, because that's not like they are over there on the other side of the room, they write … right next to you (laughing) and you can see their work and see what books they have and see their laptop screen and vice versa. So it just feels a little bit uncomfortably close” (interview with a Masters student, Oxford, 2010).

If individual working spaces are designed in such a way that students have this feeling of sitting uncomfortably close to each other, they develop coping strategies like in Lincoln College Library in Oxford. There students have the option to secure a booked individual place during examination time in one of the bays (Figure 5).
There are four places in a bay, two at a table without any separation. The places are always fully booked but the students do not choose to sit next to each other. They make arrangements for one person to come to use it in the morning and one in the afternoon. So even in the busiest times of the year half of the places stay empty.

The most confusing library setting – in my opinion – is the one at the University Library at the ZHAW Winterthur, Switzerland. There is a part of the library named ‘Lernlandschaft’ which may be translated as learning landscape or learning environment. When I visited this part of the library for the first time I expected to see a wide range of socio-material settings. Indeed, there were a lot of impressive types of learning environment, as shown in Figure 6.

I visited the library in 2017 in vacation time and anticipated these places to be buzzing and vibrant during the semester. But at the same time I was very irritated because of the signs everywhere asking for total silence in this Lernlandschaft. The management gave me the explanation that during the semester usually the first person of the day to use the area defines the level of noise: if it is an individual learner working in silence all the following people will adapt their behaviour appropriately. If it is a chatty group the following groups will be noisy too. In 2018

Figure 6  University Library ZHAW Winterthur, 2017.
I visited the Lernlandschaft during examination time and the situation was different: full to bursting and absolutely silent. The problem here is that students never know what to expect when they head towards the library for particular learning purposes. Maybe they have planned to work as a group of three, four or five in a collaborative environment and they might be confronted with an absolutely silent day. In another case, one student has planned silent individual working and then has to cope with a chatty atmosphere. In both cases the users may ask themselves: should I stay or should I go?

So you gotta let your users know – for what to come and where to go!

Here are some of my recommendations. Make the intended usage visible. Provide a wide range of environment-behaviour-settings for different purposes, which are coherent. Think about the two factors to take into consideration when designing library spaces: loudness and social settings. Communicate the desired behaviour in a clear and understandable way. The information on the signs should not contradict the non-verbal information given by the built environment. Finally, don’t expect users to be fluent in Latin: neither write ‘silentium’ on signs in individual working areas nor call a group working room ‘parlatorium’ – as some libraries in Germany and Switzerland do! Just let your users know for what to come and where to go.

References


