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CASE STUDY



Student centre inspired by rich history:
University of Queensland's Walter Harrison Law Library
Brisbane, Australia

A library rich with architectural history –

The Walter Harrison Law Library, located at the University of Queensland (UQ), boasts a long and rich history, having been built almost 70 years ago in 1949. Since its original construction, the library has undergone a number of extensions and renovations. In 1989, an award-winning design by architect Robert Riddel added a new level to the building. Then, 10 years later, at a time when the library was in possession of around 7000 linear metres of law books, it was restored and expanded yet again, this time by Wilson Architects, to help bring it into the digital age. Since then, the building has grown organically, requiring significant change to suit the contemporary requirements of teaching and learning.

Now, almost two decades later, BVN Architects has reimaged the much-loved space. “The brief was to create a place that envisages the school’s vision of being inspirational, inquiring and international,” says Lucas Leo of BVN. “In Australia, there are 43 law schools and UQ is not only competing with them but also with universities on the global stage, so the facilities have to excel in order to attract new academics and students.”



The University of Queensland's Forgan Smith building, which houses the law library.

The lower level of the library is a modern, open plan reading hall where students can spend time in groups and study. The second level features tables and seating that surround a giant ‘paper lantern’, and on the top level is a quiet reading room for individual study. This allows the library to separate quiet zones from those that are louder, with the loudest work happening on the ground level, and the environment getting quieter as you travel up the building, making the study facilities well-designed and functional.



The warmth of the timber, combined with the craftsmanship behind the Toro Chair's design, enriches the traditional library palette that extends throughout the interior.

The interior's palette draws upon the memory of old leather-bound books with black and gold spines – paying homage to the rich experience often associated with traditional reading rooms. A giant ‘paper lantern’ feature, designed by BVN, acts as a visual guide for students and visitors throughout the lower levels of the building.

Toro seating: a study space for everyone –

Throughout the library, the classic Toro Chairs and Stools feature within communal zones at study desks, tables and benches. With a custom stain on natural Oak, the seating carries a warm and inviting finish that marries beautifully with the dark timber of the library's interior furnishings and décor.

“The first time we used pieces from the Toro collection was when we worked on the Translational Research Institute,” Leo says. “On that project, we spent a lot of time looking for a chair that was locally designed and made, and was also a really nice piece of design. Finally we found Toro. It's a nice suite of chairs; throughout our work we've used the high chair, the standard version and the stool. The chairs and stools specified for the library, however, were customised with a stain which was aligned with the interior.”

Firm linework and strong joinery, which includes high-strength dowel and finger joints for optimal strength, leaves the seating suitable for high-impact use within education spaces. Such joins also negate the need for external metal fasteners, which keeps a minimalist profile that is safe and smooth to touch.

An award-winning outcome –

At the National Architecture Awards in 2017, the refurbishment of the library won both the award for interior architecture and the award for educational architecture. “The remarkable quality of finishes and furniture enhances the sequential special order and combines with the programmatic elements to deliver an exceptional and enriching setting for teaching and research,” the jury said.

“I’ve been back many times and I could see the academics were more engaged in the activities of the school,” says Leo. “Attendance numbers and research grants have increased, and they now have external organisations booking and using the space, which is fantastic.”



Utilised throughout the studying and meeting zones, Toro Stool's custom stain marries with the dark timber of the library's furnishings and décor.

Interior design by BVN Architecture
Photography by Christopher Frederick Jones