BUILDING THE HOUSE:
Planning Law Libraries In a Changing Environment

Construction and remodeling projects in law libraries most often occur in response to stresses placed upon facilities by collection growth and technological advances. Law librarians charged with planning such projects face a challenging task. They must anticipate the expansion of the collection as well as the course of new technology while also adhering to current architectural trends and the designs mandated by their parent organizations. This exhibit explores some of the factors involved in planning law libraries in such a changing environment.

FORETHOUGHT AND PLANNING

"...the construction of the house which is to contain a law library involves something of the same forethought and planning as the up-building of the collection it is to contain."

John H. Arnold, Harvard Law Librarian
(LLJ, 5(2-3), 1912, p. 25)

John Arnold wrote from experience—when Harvard Law Library moved into a new home, Austin Hall in 1893, the facility's planners had confidently declared that this new facility could accommodate fifty years of growth. A mere fifteen years later, however, the law library had grown far beyond all expectations and Austin Hall had become obsolete. In 1907, as a result of this miscalculation, the bulk of the law library collection was again packed up and moved into another new home, Langdell Hall. Such growth was not unique to the turn of the century. Between 1912 and 1983, Harvard's law collection grew from 150,000 to 1,372,924 volumes. Indeed, most law libraries experienced substantial growth during that period: the University of Illinois expanded from 13,000 to 403,501 volumes; Florida State University from 1,250 to 132,742; and Washburn College from 2,500 to 43,441. With such levels of collection growth and with concurrent innovations in technology, new construction or remodeling became absolutely necessary.

BEGINNINGS

"...if you hear your library is to have a new building, you should take a leave, get sick, or get another job so that you can blame someone else for the goofs."

Vernon Smith
(LLJ, 51, 1958, p. 332)

In the years since the Austin Hall experience, many law librarians have felt the pleasure and anxiety of participating in library construction projects and have learned for themselves the importance of forethought in successfully planning new facilities. Many have also learned that the planning phase can exact a great toll in time and energy, often to the detriment of other professional projects and obligations. (Items 1-3) After all, there is much at stake—one uninformed or ill-conceived decision can easily erode the utility of the library, the productivity of the staff, and the satisfaction of the users. The weight of this responsibility presses even harder with the knowledge that once design decisions are transformed into steel and concrete, they become permanent testaments to the wisdom or folly of the designers. Equally daunting, especially in an era of rapid technological obsolescence, is the realization that what is recognized as state of the art today becomes an antique all too soon. Thus, those planning the construction of a new law library or the renovation of an existing facility must anticipate the course of an ever changing law library environment.
EXTERIORS

"The law library can be thought of as a building within a building."

George S. Grossman
(LLJ, 79, 1987, p. 491)

With very few exceptions a law library is a component of a larger legal facility—a school, a firm, or a court; the architectural design of the building in which a law library resides reflects the image projected by its parent institution. Inside that building the philosophical mission of the library has remained fairly constant through the years but the physical environment has evolved according to the ebb and flow of architectural trends and technological innovations. The connection to ancient authority projected by the neo-classic and gothic visages of many pre-WWII law libraries has gradually succumbed to the architectural language of succeeding decades. The law library building boom of the 1950s produced facilities sympathetic to the utilitarian rigid steel and glass modernism of that era. (Item 4) More recently, building design has incorporated a variety of forms and dramatic shapes. At the University of Michigan, an amalgamation of traditional and modern design links the new law library to the authority of the past and the promise of the future. (Item 5) At the University of Iowa, angular glass walls and reflective surfaces suggest that the future has arrived. (Item 6)

INTERIORS

"They have no frills, but are strong, neatly constructed and finely finished in baked-on enamels."

Shelving advertisement
(LLJ, 5, 1912)

While law librarians seldom exert significant influence on the exterior designs of their libraries, they frequently contribute to the interior designs. Years of working with and using law libraries make the librarian uniquely qualified to advise architects regarding the most efficient location of carrels, furnishings, and shelves. (Items 7-9) Only law librarians really understand how shelving and flooring and lighting affect the daily operation of the library, and only law librarians can really plan those features effectively. There are a multitude of features to consider when planning the interior of a law library. One of the oldest, most basic tasks is the selection of shelving. Early in the century this might have been a relatively simple task, but the number of available options since then has become rather daunting: metal, wood, wood trimmed, laminated, cantilevered, compact, manual, electric, divided, one piece, and slanted or pull-out reading shelves. (Items 10-11) Of course, just as many options have come to exist for other types of library fixtures. Over the years, planners have equipped law libraries with noisy wooden floors, quieter tile floors, and virtually silent carpeted floors; lighting trends have included table lamps, hanging lamps, hot incandescent, buzzing fluorescent, filtered, hidden, and indirect. (Items 12-13) More recently, library planners have recognized the need of providing equal access to all patrons, and new library designs feature spaces, furnishings, and equipment suited to that purpose. (Item 14)
TECHNOLOGY

"...a substantial part of the steel shelving (the metal being such a good conductor of heat) may become so hot as to damage the books on them to a greater degree....the books on the steel shelving were burned to a powder resembling tobacco ashes."
Frederick D. Colson describing the New York State Law Library fire (LLJ, 6, January, 1914, p. 39)

With every advance in technology, the process of planning the interior of a law library has become more complex. In addition to shelving, flooring, and furnishings, decisions must be made about environmental systems designed to protect the building, its contents, and its users. Fire has damaged and destroyed libraries for centuries. (Items 15-16) In the past, law library planners had few design options beyond the inclusion of fire walls and fire doors. Now technology offers them such options as sophisticated heat detectors, smoke detectors, and sprinkler systems.

Technology also provides new ways to address security issues; Tattletape, monitors, and motion detectors are all options available to law library planners. (Items 17-18) There have also been a series of new technologies to consider when planning for equipment to be used by staff and patrons. The changing nature of micro-forms have forced decisions about readers and printers for film, card, and fiche. (Items 19-20) Other information formats have required planners to speculate on the longevity of audio formats that range from reel-to-reel and cassette; and video formats that include Beta and VHS.

COMPUTERS

"The use of computers in law libraries is an intriguing concept that also raises problems for building planning....it is not likely that computer-produced catalogs will replace the traditional card catalog...."
Mortimer Schwartz (LLJ, 81, 1968, p. 81)

It is almost unimaginable that law libraries once functioned without the assistance of micro-processors, yet computer-assisted catalogs and reference services are a fairly recent phenomena. Only fifteen years ago, the most advanced piece of technology in many reading/reference rooms was a phone, electric typewriter, or microfilm reader-printer; today computer terminals are common and even expected features. (Items 21-22) Law librarians, law students, and legal professionals increasingly rely upon the resources of online databases, such as LEXIS and LAWNET, and on automated card catalogs. As more law library users gain familiarity and competence with such systems, and as more information is made available electronically, there will be greater and greater demands for reference terminals and computer labs. (Items 23-24) In the past, planners generally assumed that new facilities could accommodate twenty to thirty years of growth, but today's rapidly accelerating technology produces more rapid obsolescence. To address this trend, library designers must ask new questions. Will electronic publishing reduce the number of new books and thus the requirements for new shelf space? Will today's electrical specifications and conduits prove adequate for accommodating the next generation of hardware and fiber-optics? Will so many library users be equipped with laptop and computer notebooks to necessitate electrical and telecommunication outlets at every work-space? In an era enthralled with cutting-edge technology, the challenges facing library planners are daunting.
HELP

"I'm sure you'll have some good suggestions to make—I'd appreciate hearing from you about this."

Thomas S. Dabagh to Hobart R. Coffey
February 13, 1945 (85/1/208 Bl)

Since few law librarians have expertise in planning the construction or the renovation of a library, they naturally solicit the advice of more experienced colleagues. (Item 25) It is a logical and prudent approach which equips the novice planner with new insights, practical tips, moral support, and sometimes offers of free materials. (Item 26) Yet, as valuable as such contacts might be, there is always a thirst for more specific and more detailed information. Here, the AALL and its professional networks prove an invaluable resource. Since early in its history, the AALL has attempted to provide its membership with information about facets of building planning and construction. (Item 27) While the Association has never chosen to establish a committee devoted specifically to planning and building law libraries, it has addressed the topic in various forums. (Items 28-29) The Law Library Journal frequently publishes articles describing the building projects of specific institutions. Furthermore, issues of the LLJ in 1958, 1968, and 1987 have been almost entirely devoted to discussions and articles on diverse aspects of planning for new and remodeled law library facilities. The AALL also facilitates the exchange of pertinent information through special institutes and workshops, the American Association of Law Libraries Newsletter, and other publications. (Items 30-31)

COMPLETION

"....stress and anxiety fade, and the new environment begins to improve the daily life of the law school and the library."

Anita K. Head
(LLJ, 79, 1987, p. 545)

The final process of moving books, equipment, and personnel into a new building or shifting them within the confines of a newly renovated facility is a difficult task requiring extraordinary planning. Such moves often require special containers, an augmented staff, and a great deal of patience. (Item 32) Once relocated to the new environment, staff and patrons often undergo a difficult period of adjustment. Initially, there may be complaints and second guessing about the wisdom and utility of the new design. However, such feelings gradually subside as staff and patrons discover the advantages of their new library. Eventually, the library planners may breathe a sigh of relief and return to their other duties, but always in the back of their minds is the nagging feeling that in this world of rapid change, even the most carefully planned law library will become prematurely obsolete far sooner than anyone could have imagined.

This exhibit was prepared by Patricia Wenzel under the direction of William Maher at the University of Illinois Archives at Urbana-Champaign. Special thanks are due to the law librarians throughout the country who generously contributed materials. The AALL Archives especially wishes to thank the law library staffs of Cooley Law School-Lansing, Michigan; the University of Iowa-Iowa City; the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor; Washburn University-Topeka, Kansas; the University of Tennessee-Knoxville; and the Supreme Court of Ohio in Columbus. Thanks also goes to the AALL Archival liaison, Cheryl Nyberg, who expended considerable effort in soliciting materials from library colleagues.

All materials contributed for this exhibit are now a permanent part of the AALL Archives. If you or your institution wishes to contribute photos, building plans, dedication books, or other materials related to the construction of new law library facilities please contact the AALL Archives.