December, 2007

But Why Do You Need The Walls?

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Changes in information technology may affect the way we design student study and research space in law schools and academic law libraries

by Christopher Simoni and Robert Richards
It is common knowledge that developments in information technology have affected almost everything associated with libraries. These developments—which have caused a sea-change in patron research and information gathering preferences and practices, collections, library operations and services, and library design—will continue to play out in ways we cannot foresee. How are law schools and law libraries planning new construction or major renovation to act within this environment?

The following paragraphs are a thought experiment that asks the following question. Is it possible, given the impact of information technology on student research and study preferences and practices, to design a law school and academic law library in which some student seating and study space, traditionally located in the library, are moved outside the library to a common space shared by the law school and library, without compromising the quality of the library and its services?

We conclude that in some circumstances one could design a law school and library that share common spaces for student research and study. We further conclude that such a design can provide law schools with flexibility in building design, while at the same time benefiting law students by providing them a physical environment that supports the way they work.

This conclusion is not without its difficulties because some may view any suggestion that reduces library space generally as diminishing the library's value. Others may find the specific conclusion even more problematic because it rests on the specific premise that the impact of technology on student research and study practices and preferences has been so significant that some library space devoted to student seating might be moved outside the library.

We note at the outset that our conclusions are neither predictions nor prescriptions about what will or should happen at some point in the future. They are tentative propositions to be evaluated and tested by law schools and libraries considering construction or major renovation of law school space as they assess their program needs.

**Sharing Space**

This piece was motivated by an architectural charrette one of the authors attended in 2006. Convened by a team of architects from a nationally known firm, the participants were asked to consider and critique various versions and visions of an academic law library the firm was designing as part of a new law school building for a well-established law school.

During the course of the day, the architects pressed the librarians with the following question, which gave rise to the title of this piece. *With the developments in information technology and the way they have affected how people research, and assuming one did not have to worry about the physical security of the print collection, could one design a law school and law library which were physically open to one another without walls separating them, and which shared common spaces for some use?*

In posing this question, the architects did not challenge the importance of academic law libraries; instead they wanted to know: “Do we need to design law libraries the way we always have?”

The librarians were initially cool to the idea, noting that in addition to needing security for their collections, libraries also provide students quiet study and research space near the collections. As the day progressed, and as the architects responded to the librarians’ concerns, some concluded that the idea of an academic law library physically open to and integrated with the law school should not automatically be ruled out as a bad idea and might well be a good idea if done right.

Before describing what such a law school and library might look like, it may be useful to describe the conditions that underpin the architects’ question and the authors’ conclusions. As with so many situations today, these conditions involve technology and its known as well as unforeseeable effects on students and libraries.

**Digital Natives**

The majority of students coming to law school today are digital natives who grew up with computers and, for much of their life, access to the Internet. Their research and information finding preferences were set as undergraduates, for almost all of whom Google, not a library Web page or OPAC, was the preferred and trusted research tool. Even though law students are smart enough to know that the Internet is full of incomplete and misleading information, it remains their preferred starting point for research. They have a distinct preference for electronic resources for reasons of convenience and immediacy.

Students also have come to expect technology to deliver a range of services that are neither place- nor time-bound. They do their banking, reserve movie tickets, book airline flights, and buy books online without the intervention of human agents. They expect such sites to provide an experience that is friction-free and easy to navigate—no lengthy FAQs about using the service, no long descriptions about searching, and immediate feedback. They also expect the services to be available at a time and location of their choosing. For the most part, this is what business gives them.

Perhaps most important, students use technology to communicate and stay connected with friends, family, and fellow students. It is common to see students at a computer running e-mail and an instant messaging (IM) client and talking on a cell phone, all while studying with a group of friends.

This is the background our students bring to law school and helps explain their expectations regarding the role technology plays in their education. In law school, most aspects of their legal education, from the administrative to the instructional to the research to the personal, are affected, at least in part, by technology.

While some law schools still teach legal research using print sources, an increasing number now focus on improving their students’ facility with online resources. Not surprisingly, most law students, accustomed to online research in high school and college, prefer electronic resources. Faculty routinely assign digital course readings delivered by course management systems, such as TWEN or BlackBoard. Student-edited law journals are moving their content online, and the number of e-only student-edited journals has increased significantly, and the time-honored tradition of cite checking is changing as a growing number of journals permit their members to cite check using electronic resources.

Academic legal reference librarians routinely accept student reference questions by phone, e-mail, and, increasingly, though IM. All of these factors permit a law student to perform most required research tasks—as law journal cite checker, moot court participant, seminar paper writer, and faculty research assistant—via laptop from anywhere in the law school building. Wireless networks and laptop computers distribute the intellectual content traditionally stored in the law library throughout the law school building, as students perform their research in the student lounge, cafeteria, conference rooms, student organization offices, empty classrooms, hallways, or the law library, as they choose.

Without speculating on the reasons for this change, we note that law students today...
seem more willing to work and study collaboratively in small groups than students in the past. Our observations suggest that most law students spend relatively little time in solitary study memorizing doctrine and a great deal of time interacting with their peers, testing their understanding by posing questions and trying out arguments.

Yet most law students do spend some time in quiet study before exams, and many law students also require a tranquil space in which to do research tasks. Students are quick to head to the library for serious work.

**Increase Foot Traffic**

The effect of technology on library services and space has been as profound as its effect on student research and study practices, in some instances requiring a fundamental reconceptualization about how we think about libraries and, by extension, library design. The effect has been especially profound in law firm and corporate libraries, many of which have experienced a significant loss of collection space as patrons rely more on electronic information resources. These latter instances are examples of design with a vengeance.

Over the past several decades the once common view of libraries primarily as repositories of print materials has changed. When libraries were viewed this way, it was essential for them to provide sufficient onsite seating to accommodate students and scholars who had to travel to the library to use the resources. Technology has changed that. Although print materials continue to play a significant role for the indefinite future, fewer patrons come to the library to use them. Consequently, changing user research preferences and practices have sparked general academic and public libraries to rethink how to make library space more attractive to today’s increasingly digitally-reliant patrons.

An informal survey of recent public library construction, such as the Vancouver and Salt Lake City public libraries, and planned construction, such as the Philadelphia Free Library, show spaces designed to merge a variety of activities and functions (not all of them traditional library functions) within the library footprint, thereby increasing foot traffic to the library and emphasizing the library as an active meeting space, not a book repository.

In general academic libraries, the trend has been to build the “information commons.” These are usually large open areas, replete with workstations and library assistance, where students can work collaboratively on projects and that will be attractive to faculty, making it increasingly likely that faculty and students will have serendipitous “meetings” outside the formal classroom setting. As with the public libraries, the design goal behind the information commons is, at least in part, to attract people who might not otherwise come to the library and create collaborative and socially interactive work spaces. The focus in library design has shifted away from information to users and their needs.

At this point it is reasonable to ask why libraries work so hard, through design and programming, to increase foot traffic. The answer is that technology provides library patrons the opportunity to choose from a variety of venues that meet their information and study needs; the library is but one of them.

Academic law libraries have been less affected by these changes because they are located in the same facility that houses faculty offices, student space, and classrooms (students don’t have to walk across campus between classes to use the library), and because they serve a smaller and more homogeneous patron base than public and general academic libraries (most other patrons in the library also are law students). These factors give academic law libraries a comparative advantage in aligning the library’s mission and use of space with the school’s educational mission; these factors also create for law libraries opportunities for involvement in the law school mission about which other types of academic libraries can only dream.

**Designing Space**

In this environment, how might one design common space for law schools and libraries?

One way to think of this question is to ask what parts, if any, of a library’s mission and program can be delivered outside its physical walls without compromising the library’s effectiveness.

The answer is straightforward: only portions of student seating can be located outside the library. Without wholesale changes in library operations, one cannot move the library’s walls to the school without compromising the security of the tangible collection, and although one could do later, do the work, it’s still not good enough. But can one move portions of what traditionally has been library seating outside the library without significantly affecting the nature and purpose of the library and, perhaps, running counter to the American Bar Association (ABA)?

The ABA Standards for Approval of Law Schools Standard speak to this point. Standard 702 states that the “physical facilities of the law school shall be sufficient in size . . . to accommodate the law school’s students.” To this, Interpretation 702-1 adds, “A law library shall have sufficient seating to meet the needs of the law school’s students and faculty.” Standard 703 speaks specifically about “research and study space” and states that “[a] law school shall provide, on site, sufficient quiet study and research seating for its students and faculty.”

Nothing in the standards requires all “research and study” space to be within the law library.

In surveying recent law school construction and renovation projects one sees that in addition to addressing matters such as classrooms, designers have focused on the common theme of creating distributed gathering spaces for students, either in alcoves off hallways or in a central atrium area that acts as both a central hub for law school activities, as well as a main passage way in the law school. This trend captures and facilitates the students’ demonstrated preferences for study and work environments and produces flexible space that the users themselves configure and determine how they will use. Anyone who has ever programmed space as part of a construction or renovation project knows that such space is a wonderful thing because it permits organic change in a program as user preferences change.

Some schools that have not engaged in major construction or renovation projects have increased, often at student request, the amount of seating outside the library to accommodate changing student study practices. Some of these schools have concentrated the additional seating (all with power outlets and network connectivity) in the law school atrium; others have created distributed student study spaces throughout the law school. In both instances, students have been drawn to the new spaces.

In law schools with ample seating distributed between the library and the law school, students migrate between the locations depending upon whether they want to study with others, study alone, or do research. In these settings, the seating outside the library complements but does not replace library seating.

Several law schools have built group study rooms and computer labs along common walls shared by the law school and the law library, creating shared study and work space. In this arrangement, each of the rooms has two doors, one opening into the library, and the other opening into the law school. The locks on the doors are on an automatic timer. During library hours, the door into the library is unlocked while the door to the law school is locked. After library hours, the setup is switched, with the door to the law school unlocked, and the door to the law library locked. Thus,
During library hours, students enter and exit these rooms only from the library—these are “library” rooms. After the library closes, however, the door locks automatically and students now enter and exit these rooms only from the law school side—the rooms are now “law school” rooms.

In this situation, the rooms are resources shared by the library and the law school and made accessible to students for longer periods of time than they would have had they been solely within the library. Moreover, the design of such rooms does not compromise the security of the collection. Books cannot be taken out of the library through the rooms to the law school, and individuals cannot circumvent the library security arrangements by entering the library through the group study rooms.

**Library Space outside the Library**

If one were to design a law school and library from scratch with the goal of creating common space for student use, how might one design an environment that meets students’ research and study needs with some study space outside of the library’s walls?

One approach would be to design an area in the library that is open to the law school and that provides a mixture of casual and study furniture for student study and research. Although such a space might not be as quiet as dedicated study space within the library, it is possible, using developments in acoustical engineering, to make the space appropriate for study. If you have visited an Apple store and compared the loud noise of the selling spaces with the eerie quiet of its open auditoriums, you have an understanding of how effective acoustic engineering can be.

Moreover, if this reading area is not physically separated from the law school by a wall, the space may well prove to be a magnet to students and others who want to study in groups or work on collaborative projects. An additional benefit of such an approach is that it helps provide an answer to the question of where students can study when the library is closed. Such an area, combining the best features of library study space but outside the library’s walls, can be open to students for study and research independent of library hours. This would be a boon to students during finals when they often want extended library hours to study.

If space is limited, one imagines a law school designing a central atrium located outside but near the library that serves as a gathering space for students and faculty along a traffic corridor used by faculty and students moving to and from classes. In this environment one would have an attractive mix of study tables and lounge seating, all with adequate electrical outlets and wireless access, as well as a bank of computer workstations. But for the fact that the space is outside the library, this looks much like traditional library space.

In either of the preceding scenarios, the seating outside the library would complement, not necessarily reduce, library seating. By providing a mix of study space both within and outside the library, we better accommodate how our students work today. Similarly, with the use of acoustic separation, one can conceive of an atrium that provides a mix of noisy and less-noisy zones for students. The library itself, however, would remain the preferred destination for students and faculty seeking quiet and research space adjacent to the physical collection.

In this environment an academic law library still must provide adequate study and research seating within the library. While it seems true that not all study and research seating need be within the law library, it seems equally true that not all study and research are done in groups and not all study and research are best done in common areas where noise control may be problematic. As with most things, the successful program is one that reaches a proper balance, in this instance between furthering the law school’s mission and serving the library’s mission.

**A Different Way of Thinking about Libraries**

Although librarians, including the authors, find it difficult to contemplate the loss of library space, it is clear that developments in information technology have affected not only how libraries build collections, but also how students and others work and research. If we are honest with ourselves, we must acknowledge that today’s students think about and use libraries in ways that differ from the way students even one generation ago thought about and used them. Technology and changing social patterns are further weakening the bond many of us “wish” existed between the library and all of its patrons.

While law libraries still remain a destination for law students for serious study, other locations also exert a powerful pull. Common areas in law schools fill with students working in groups or solitarily. (Before law schools made comfortable seating available for students in common areas, most, if not all, of those students would have been in the law library.) Students are not only spending time outside the library in other locations in law school; many spend hours studying in coffee shops and other locations outside the law school.

Rather than fighting a rearguard action against changing student preferences for study and research settings, law schools and libraries can recognize the changes, attempt to distinguish between long-term changes and short-term fads, and design student spaces that respond to students’ needs.

If this means some seating and study space outside the library walls, so be it. As long as the law library and law school provide adequate quiet research and study space to go with access to resources and services, it shouldn’t matter where that space is located.

Should it?

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