An Urban Transformation: Oklahoma City University School of Law Returns to its Downtown Roots

Lee Peoples, Oklahoma City University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/lee_peoples/29/
An Urban Transformation
Oklahoma City University School of Law returns to its downtown roots

By Lee F. Peoples

Oklahoma City University School of Law welcomed students to its newly renovated downtown campus for the Spring 2015 semester after two hectic years of intensive planning and construction. The five-story, 177,000-square-foot building occupies an entire city block in the heart of the city’s downtown area. Constructed in 1910 as the city’s first high school, the building was later repurposed into corporate office space. The Chickasaw Nation Law Library received prime space in the renovated building, occupying most of the first and second floors. The total project cost, including the building’s purchase, was approximately $25 million, which represents an astounding value considering that typical new construction costs for law schools routinely top $40 million.

Coming Home
The downtown move represents a return to the school’s roots. The law school operated in several downtown locations during the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s. In 1956 the school moved to the university’s main campus several miles outside of downtown. The law library and law school were housed in various buildings on campus over the years, including an army barracks, repurposed dormitories, and a prairie Gothic-style tower in need of major infrastructure improvements.

Over the past several decades the law school considered various options for improving its facilities, for example, staying on the university campus and renovating or expanding and moving to one of several downtown locations. In 2012 the law school purchased a landmark historical building in downtown Oklahoma City and began developing plans to transform the building into the law school’s new home.

The New Urbanists
In selecting its new location, Oklahoma City University School of Law joins the growing number of “new urbanist” law schools that have left their university main campuses for vibrant downtown locations. The school’s new location is in the middle of the action. It’s just steps away from federal and state courthouses and major legal employers including law firms, corporations, and government agencies. The state capitol complex is two miles away.

The city’s downtown area is experiencing a renaissance driven by a growing economy and several decades of voter-approved capital improvements including a streetcar, ballpark, art museum, concert hall, library, parks, Olympic rowing and aquatic center, and convention center. Prospective students are drawn to the area’s mix of restaurants, urban housing options, and variety of cultural attractions, such as an outdoor beer garden and a monthly food truck festival that draws 40,000 visitors.

Back to School
The building was designed by noted local architect Solomon Andrew Layton, who also designed the Oklahoma State Capitol and many other important historical structures around the state and region. The building is maintained on the National Register of Historic Buildings, and its collegiate Gothic style makes it a perfect home for a law school. The building includes a number of impressive original architectural details—parapets, formal entries with iron gates, mosaic tile floors, marble-lined vestibules, and an ornately decorated proscenium arch.

The building served as a high school from 1910 to the 1970s. Historical photos reveal numerous original amenities including a 1,600-seat auditorium, library, cafeteria, two-story gymnasium, swimming pool, and rooms designed as machine and sewing shops. The school educated the city’s future leaders and was the first school in the city to be racially integrated. In the early 1980s, it was sold to Southwestern Bell Telephone Company. The utility company invested in a massive renovation of the building, transforming it from a high school into its corporate headquarters.

Our building is two blocks away from the site of the largest act of domestic terrorism in the history of the United States, the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. Our building suffered minor damage from the blast and was used as a makeshift command center following the attack.
Reading tables provide space for quiet study.

**Designed for Learning**
Planning for the building’s transformation from corporate office space back into a school began in earnest after the purchase was completed. The library and other law school spaces were intentionally designed to encourage learning. This approach was pioneered by Yale University Librarian Emeritus Scott Bennett over the past decade but had yet to be applied in legal education. The design-for-learning technique was used to create spaces that help students become self-conscious and self-directed in their learning. This type of learning is called “intentional learning,” and the landmark 2007 Carnegie Foundation’s report *Educating Lawyers* recommended its implementation in legal education.

Designing for learning began with student and faculty surveys to determine what intentional learning behaviors were most important. Studying alone outside of class ranked highest followed by several variations of collaboration. The survey also asked students and faculty to rank the types of spaces that best support these learning behaviors. A café, a learning commons, and study rooms emerged as highly supportive of collaboration. Carrels and study rooms were found to support silent study outside of class.

**The Learning Commons**
The library spaces in our new building began to take shape based on the survey results. The first floor was designed as a noisy, collaborative place featuring the Gaylord Family Learning Commons. A learning commons is a space that brings students, faculty, academic and IT support, and librarians together around shared-learning tasks. Learning commons have been popular in university libraries for several years and are slowly being implemented in academic law libraries. Amenities are strategically placed in the learning commons to draw students, faculty, and others in and create “planned collisions,” chance encounters between members of a law school community purposefully created through design choices. Students run into faculty members at the café. Librarians chat with admissions staff while waiting for coffee. These informal interactions can lead to discussions about one another’s work and create what space planners call “knowledge spillovers.”

Student lockers, refrigerators, microwaves, showers, and a lactation room are adjacent to the commons. The commons is centered around a large café surrounded by various types of seating designed to encourage collaboration. Students, librarians, faculty, and academic support use a standing-height table equipped with a large flat-screen monitor for collaborative projects. The café includes eight data diner booths with flat-screen monitors and connections for laptops and mobile devices. Study aids, legal-themed DVDs, and casual reading materials draw students into the commons, which is adjacent to the William C. Mee Computer Lab and Homsey Family Technology Suite where students receive IT support.

Casual discussions that start in the noisy commons lead to quieter study and collaboration in several adjacent glass-walled study rooms. The Gerald and Jane Jayroe Gamble Library Classroom is an open space visible from the commons and used for legal research and other skills instruction. These collaborative spaces are filled with technology and can be reserved by students using wall-mounted iPads that display the school’s room scheduling program.

**Space for Quiet Study**
The Chickasaw Nation Law Library was pleased to be assigned the majority of the space on the building’s second floor, which also serves as the building’s main entrance. The reference reading room, circulation desk, and library offices are all located in this prime location near the main entrance. Glass walls and entry doors make the library staff and reference collection highly visible and easily accessible.

A café is situated at the center of the busy Gaylord Family Learning Commons.
accessible to students, faculty, and other visitors. Light shafts spanning the building's entire five stories fill the reading room with abundant natural light.

Reference services are provided at a standing-height collaboration desk. All library offices are clustered together behind the circulation desk and share a common break room. This arrangement is a welcome departure from the library's previous configuration with departments and offices spread out over two floors. Closer physical proximity has improved collaboration and camaraderie between departments.

Silent study areas are located around the perimeter of the second floor, which receives abundant natural light from the building's recently replaced windows. Carrels ring the exterior walls and enjoy street-level views of the surrounding neighborhood. Lighting was upgraded to LED fixtures shortly after occupancy to increase the amount of light at reading tables.

**The Collection**

The library began strategically transitioning its collection from print to digital several years before moving to its new location. The library joined collaborative retention and sharing projects including PALMprint and the Mid-America Law Library Consortium's innovative print treatise and statute-sharing agreements. The school's curricular, scholarly, and service programs and objectives were carefully considered. Faculty input into collection decisions was gathered through surveys. When combined with increased subscriptions to electronic resources, these efforts allowed a significant reduction in the library's print holdings of reporters, digests, statutes, law reviews, and treaties. In the four years preceding the move, the library discarded approximately 87,000 print volumes and 70,000 microfiche volume equivalents.

The building's previous owner installed a large amount of compact shelving for record storage just a few years before the law school acquired the building. Within a year of installation the company transitioned all of its records to digital format. The shelving is in pristine condition and luckily stayed with the building. The capacity of the system was expanded to nearly 13,000 linear feet of shelving during building renovations. Approximately 93 percent of the library's collection is housed in compact shelving. The library is integrating StackMap into its online catalog to improve the accessibility of items in compact shelving.

The library's reference, Oklahoma law, and Native American collections are located in traditional open shelving around the second floor. The library shares this floor with the Joe and Charlotte Edwards Law Review Suite, American Indian Law and Sovereignty Center, and Jodi G. Marquette American Indian Wills Clinic. Close physical proximity will only enhance the library's longstanding outreach efforts to these departments. The library's Native American print collection is strategically placed in open shelving adjacent to the Sovereignty Center and Wills Clinic. Locating this collection next to the academic programs it supports taps into the collections place-making power to encourage serendipity and connect patrons with their community and its values.
Library Without Walls
The library-without-walls concept is embraced throughout the building. Students enjoy 24/7 access to the library areas and the collection. Multiple entry points into library areas make implementing security gates impractical. A self-checkout station is located near the circulation desk and is available for students and faculty to check out books at any time. Library services are projected throughout the building using mobile reference desks. These desks are typically stationed on the classroom and faculty floors and are staffed throughout the week by reference librarians. Mobile reference service allows librarians to meet faculty and students on their own turf. Reference librarians also spend time each semester embedded in the clinic providing advanced legal research training. The library greatly expanded the number of study rooms from 11 to 18. Rooms are distributed throughout the building, are filled with technology, and may be reserved using the wall-mounted iPads.

The Law School’s Living Room
The third floor houses departments frequented by students, including admissions, academic services, career services, and the student bar association. The former high school auditorium at the center of the third floor was transformed into McLaughlin Hall. The original ornately detailed proscenium arch was preserved as a key architectural feature of the space. McLaughlin Hall is filled with soft seating and functions as the school’s living room, providing a space for casual interaction. The ample amount of soft seating in McLaughlin Hall meant that library seating on the second floor could mostly consist of reading tables and study carrels.

The third floor museum is the building’s most historically significant space. The museum previously served as the high school’s grand entrance. The mosaic tile floor includes images symbolizing the building’s original function as a high school. The walls feature marble wainscoting and built-in glass display cases housing memorabilia from the law school and high school.

The crown jewels of the museum are two large murals painted by Oklahoma artist Olinka Hrdy in 1928. Hrdy, Oklahoma’s first modern artist, collaborated with Frank Lloyd Wright at his Taliesin Studio. She painted Art Deco murals that once adorned a Tulsa building designed by Wright’s protégé but that have since mysteriously vanished. The murals in the law school’s museum are extremely rare, as most of Hrdy’s other murals were destroyed. Only one other Hrdy mural exists, and it is located in California. Associate Library Director and Law Library Professor Jennifer Prilliman took the lead in ensuring the preservation of the Hrdy murals. The murals were restored and reinstalled shortly before the building’s opening.

Prilliman chairs the law school’s history and art committee. She is working with the Oklahoma Historical Society to create exhibits around the building that tell the story of the building’s role in the city’s development and the history of the law school. A special exhibit is being developed to explain the building’s role in the Oklahoma City bombing, to support the school’s Judge Alfred P. Murrah Center for Homeland Security Law and Policy, and to highlight the library’s special collections in these areas.

Rotating exhibits and the school’s permanent art collection are a key component in the library’s place-making initiative. Areas housing the Native American and Oklahoma collections are filled with relevant art and artifacts. These objects advance the place-making goals of improving the space’s comfort and attractiveness and of connecting students and faculty to the school’s community and its values and traditions. Descriptive plaques near the artwork and a soon-to-be-developed self-guided audio tour will aim to spark interest in the library’s print and electronic resources.

Topping It Off
Faculty offices and the Dean’s Suite are located on the Devon Energy Faculty Floor. Executive offices were previously located on this floor, making it easy to repurpose the space for faculty offices. Soft seating areas are strategically placed outside of faculty offices to encourage collaborative discussion. Reference librarians spend several hours each week stationed at a mobile reference desk on this floor to meet faculty on their own turf.

Classrooms, the J. William Conger Courtroom, an auditorium, and several study rooms are located on the Inasmuch Foundation Learning Level. Floor-to-ceiling windows fill the classrooms with abundant natural light and stunning views of the downtown skyline. Each classroom is equipped with state-of-the-art technology, including SMART software, automated lecture capture, and Polycom distance learning capabilities.

Lee F. Peoples
(ipeoples@okcu.edu), Frederick Charles Hicks Professor of Law and Law Library Director, Oklahoma City University School of Law, Oklahoma City

Portions of this article were adapted from the author’s other recent articles: “Placemaking in the Academic Law Library,” Legal Reference Services Quarterly, 2014, and “Designing a Law Library to Encourage Learning,” Journal of Legal Education, 2014.