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Going Vertical: From a Traditional Campus Library to a Contemporary Downtown Library

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Going Vertical

From a traditional campus library to a contemporary downtown library

By Corie Dugas and Joe Custer

Photo courtesy of James Visser.



An open stairwell seamlessly connects the fifth and sixth floors. Photo courtesy of Josh Booth.

Some surprises, like a home-cooked meal after a long day, are fantastic. Others, such as a flat tire when you are running late, are not. When the former president of Saint Louis University (SLU) suddenly announced that SLU's Law School would be moving off campus to a downtown location, we were not sure if it was a good or bad surprise.

Long-time SLU backers and real estate entrepreneurs Joe and Loretta Scott donated the former Southwestern Bell/AT&T Building to the university in January 2012. The 11-story, 260,000-square-foot building was situated in the heart of downtown St. Louis. The nondescript building included a lobby, three floors of parking, and seven floors of traditional office space. While the location was prime, the interior was not. The university quickly hired The Lawrence Group to redesign the space and create the ideal atmosphere for a law school.

Building a Plan

Early in the process, the SLU law school dean sent the library director to several other cities to scope out various law school and library designs. Two libraries that closely aligned with the vision of SLU Law Library were the new Thomas Jefferson School of Law in San Diego and Loyola University Chicago's School of Law. Both libraries graciously shared blueprints of their spaces, and we were able to incorporate aspects of each into our design. Expanding from the design of Thomas Jefferson's Library, we planned for a very open library.

The architects determined that it was possible to add a twelfth floor to the roof of the building, and the other floors were doled out for classrooms, departments, faculty offices, and, of course, the library. The contemporary building's 12-story vertical layout created a very different footprint than our former sprawling, three-story building. The library would occupy two floors, the fifth and sixth, of the new building. These lower floors could support the weight of library materials. The fifth floor could also be reinforced from inside the parking garage so that microform cabinets could be placed there with the possibility of adding compact shelving in the future. Though the square footage of the library shrank with the move, the new space lacked the inconsistent, piecemeal layout of the old building.

Designing a 21st Century Library

We wanted an open, inviting space upon entering the new library on the sixth floor. Our old law library was rather congested at the main entrance, and we wanted a space that deemphasized rows and rows of stacks and emphasized collaboration, comfort, and good study space. Tables and carrels were interspersed within the stacks, which provides some built-in quiet. Students have the option of studying in nook-and-cranny areas or open spaces. We also put in several soft seating areas on the sixth floor and another comfortable seating area on the fifth floor near the open stairwell.

One of the main goals in designing the library was creating a showpiece. The architects included a balcony from the sixth floor overlooking the fifth floor reading room. A window spanning the two library floors showcases the view of the St. Louis Civil Courts Building and historic City Hall. While the image was grand, the staff initially worried about noise spilling over the balcony and into the quiet reading room below. To address this concern, the architects included nondescript buffers on the walls and an attractive, wood, noise-muffling ceiling in the reading room to reduce sound. In addition, the staff designed the furniture on the sixth floor to have quieter study carrels wrapped around the opening to the balcony. In the end, the balcony and windows create a powerful image while the reading room has remained quiet.

The library staff had significant input into where we would work and where offices would be located. After being split between two floors in our old space, we decided to set up all offices and workspaces on the sixth floor. Having everyone on the same floor has turned out to be ideal. The full-time librarians have offices while the professional staff has received tasteful



The variety of seating options throughout the library ensures that there is a perfect study spot for every student. Photo courtesy of Jay Fram.

and functional workspaces. The staff also designed the circulation and reference service points. The Access Services and the Reference departments had the most impact on the design and functionality of the two desks, but the whole staff offered helpful feedback.

Evaluating the Collection

Because the space in the library was at a premium, we were forced to make some decisions when it came to our print collection. We were incredibly lucky to have use of the university library storage facility, Searls Hall, named after long-time Law Library Director Eileen Searls. We wasted little time, and in February 2012 we decided to start moving materials that the Collection Development Committee had pinpointed for storage. This included sets that were not current, older monographs, and rarely used state materials. These titles are still represented in our online catalog, however, and have a 24-hour turnaround time for retrieval from Searls Hall.

We kept the print materials most heavily used in-house while also focusing on the best way to showcase our electronic resources. The reference desk is equipped with a second monitor to allow one-on-one instruction in that location. Computer terminals are placed adjacent to both the reference and circulation desks for quick access and assistance. The building-wide wireless access and numerous power outlets allow students to seamlessly use the electronic resources in the library.

Student Demands

While it served the basic functions of a law library, we were aware that our previous space, the Omer Poos Law Library, was a bit deficient when it came to student needs. The new building presented an opportunity to tune into the needs and demands of the student body and to try to successfully meet them in the new space. Casual student comments, surveys of the student body, and complaints at library service points in the former building all circled around the lack of outlet access. In the new space, the library focused on connecting power to all tables and carrels. Of the 450+ seats in the library, more than 90 percent have direct outlet access.

As the student body expanded in the early 2000s, SLU Law brought on more faculty members. As with many academic law libraries, the faculty offices were located in the library. These offices circled the perimeter of the library, and, as more faculty arrived, more of the desirable study spots near windows were repurposed as faculty office space. The impact of this change was that the library slowly became a less desirable and

healthy atmosphere for studying. During the planning stages for the Scott Law Center, the building committee and architects made the decision to move faculty offices out of the library and on to two multipurpose floors of the building. This freed the library to use nearly all of the windows in the new building for student study space. Our new space, Vincent C. Immel Law Library, has 360-degree views of downtown St. Louis that include multiple courthouses, historic City Hall, Soldier's Memorial, and several parks.



The grand two-story Reading Room windows have views of the Civil Courts building and the Carnahan Courthouse. Photo courtesy of Fentress Photography.

Matching the Location with the Services

In addition to the building being gifted by the Scotts, another motivating factor for moving SLU Law downtown was the proximity to the St. Louis courts. The library wanted to work with the rest of the law school to promote active involvement in the court system starting from students' first year. Our library added a 42-inch television screen near the entrance, and every day the screen displays several cases from nearby courts that have been selected and summarized by librarians. Students with gaps between classes or free time can check the screen for interesting cases and head across the street to watch law in practice.

Immel Law Library also has partnered with the Law Library Association of St. Louis (LLASTL), housed in the Civil Courts building next door. The partnership created with this membership library has benefited both sides of the street. Law students not only have access to the contemporary, sleek Immel Law Library with modern furnishings, but they also can access the traditional, grand LLASTL Library

with gold ceilings and solid wood shelving. The collections were merged into one online catalog, so searching and borrowing is seamless. LLASTL members have privileges at Immel Library and vice versa. Additionally, the LLASTL accepted SLU Law Library's collection of Missouri Briefs. Some CLE programs are also now being done jointly, and there are plans to extend the partnership to include a mentorship program.

Adapting for the Future

Our surprise from more than three years

ago has turned out to be a good one. The library has become more than we initially imagined. The culture and use of the library has shifted in the new building, and we are constantly adapting our services and space to make the most of our breathtaking new home. SLU's law library has always been the hub of the law school, and we diligently work to maintain that balance in our new, vertical space. ■



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