The New Building on the Block

With input from members of the law school community, a firm foundation is laid.

They called it a dinosaur. Outdated. Obsolete. Dingy.

But if aging cinder-block walls could talk, they would speak of enlightenment. Of fledgling careers taking shape. Of thousands of graduates who earned their degrees at 500 W. Baltimore St. and ventured forth to become respected attorneys, judges, public servants and CEOs for public, private, and nonprofit enterprises.

The law school building may have outlived its time, but the students, faculty and staff who taught, learned and lived the law there made it a very special place.

When Interim Dean Karen Rothenberg began a critical review of the new building plans last summer, she wanted to draw upon the perspectives of the entire law school community.

“We opened up the discussion to the faculty, staff and students to talk about choices so they could be a part of this process.”

Members of the administrative staff met with each department to determine how people function within their own work spaces and with others. Armed with a list of questions garnered from these meetings, the interim dean summoned the School’s building committee, a group of eight people representing all law
school constituencies, then called an open meeting.

"We had a number of meetings with more than 50 people attending," says José Bahamonde-González, assistant dean for administration. The group asked questions and offered solutions that were integrated into the final plans.

One major morale issue concerned the location of support staff work areas. In the original plans, staff spaces occupied the center of each floor. "We reassigned the spaces and pulled the staff offices to the outside walls where the majority will now have windows," Bahamonde-González says. Rothenberg notes that it’s a small price to pay for a satisfied support team.

"Wherever we could, we wanted to use the architecture and design to establish and preserve a sense of community within the new building," Rothenberg says. For example, the faculty expressed a desire to move their mailboxes from the dean’s suite to the faculty library so they could have a place to meet and mingle while gathering their mail.

To establish a more student-friendly environment, the Office of Admissions and Registration was modified to make students feel more welcome and included. Additional common areas were created so that members of student organizations could share work space.

Back in the mid-1960s when the old building opened its doors as the newest showplace on campus, large lecture halls and seminar rooms dominated the design, and overhead projectors and chalkboards represented the technology of the times.

"It was built at a time when legal education functioned differently," explains Professor Alan Hornstein, co-chair of the building committee. "Legal education was taught in large classes, there was no clinical program at all, and seminars were considered an innovation at that point." Much of legal education now takes place in small groups and in one-on-one clinical situations; thus the new building will feature individual student work spaces and smaller classrooms with flexible seating that can be reconfigured for multiple uses.
Perhaps the strongest design debate sprang from the issue of technology. Kate McManus, manager of construction and facilities, explains that the building committee discussed at length whether every student seat should have the capability to access data.

"Some faculty said ‘absolutely’ while others were less sure," she recalls, adding that it often shows a difference in teaching styles.

Professor Bill Reynolds, co-chair of the building committee, wants to embrace technology at every turn. "We need electronic outlets, data ports, AV everywhere, and the capacity to participate in conferences via satellite uplinks and downlinks," he says. "People have different priorities, but most faculty want state-of-the-art classrooms. It will really be spectacular."

"This project is to legal education what Camden Yards is to baseball."

The design of the new building integrates faculty offices, classrooms and administrative spaces to create a sense of community. Working floor by floor, room by room, and function by function, the building committee collaborates with the architects and consultants to create a design that brings people together.

"We wanted to make the architecture of the new building a servant to the culture of the place," says Hornstein. "The design will encourage professional interactions at every level."

Whereas the new building will be fully wired to meet the 21st century, it forever will be connected to historic Westminster Hall.

The problem of joining the two buildings, built 150 years apart, presented one of the project’s major challenges. "We thought very seriously about the relationship of the building to Westminster Hall," Hornstein notes, "especially the architectural connection between the buildings and how the courtyard visually connects to the burial ground." Redesigning access for the disabled was a top priority for Rothenberg. Access through the old building required taking a circuitous route through the law library and using a temperamental lift.

"I have seen the humiliation in the faces of people who have to go on a lift that breaks down, or who have to get around the building in the snow to get up a ramp," Rothenberg says. "I want every person to be able to enter our School with dignity and feel welcome here."

The solution features a new hallway that allows access to Westminster Hall without cutting through the library. Handicapped parking is located just outside the building, and sheltered, exterior walkways provide a grander entrance and easier access to the historic hall.

"I'm a bit prejudiced, but I think it will add considerably to the architecture of the University neighborhood," Hornstein says with just a hint of pride. "This project is to legal education what Camden Yards is to baseball.

When the building opens in 2002, visitors will see a tasteful mix of old and new, the stately old hall tied to its new neighbor, modern technology wrapped in a historically sensitive package.

"Clearly, the process was taxing, but well worth it," Rothenberg notes. "In the end, the building will be a state-of-the-art facility of which the entire community can be proud."
Shelley Gitomer, Karen Rothenberg and José Bahamonde-González donned hard hats for the demolition of the old building.

Dana Petersen, Harriet Cooperman ’78, Alison Asti ’79 and Louise Mitchaux Gonzales ’76, all members of the law school’s Board of Visitors, attended the Oct. 29 groundbreaking ceremony.

Joining University President David J. Ramsay, Karen Rothenberg and Social Work Dean Jesse J. Harris in the groundbreaking ceremony were Gov. Parris Glendening, State Treasurer Richard Dixon, Maryland Senate President Mike Miller, Mayor Kurt Schmoke, U.S. Rep. Benjamin Cardin, and regent Edwin Crawford.

Hanan Sibel ’58 (at left) and Frank Burch ’74 provided outstanding leadership for the School’s Building Campaign.

Paul D. Bekman ’71 and his wife, Arlene, celebrate the Oct. 29 groundbreaking at a dinner held that evening at the Walters Art Gallery.

(From left) Doris Patz and Willard and Lillian Hackerman attended the groundbreaking dinner.

(From left) Dana Petersen, Harriet Cooperman ’78, Alison Asti ’79 and Louise Mitchaux Gonzales ’76, all members of the law school’s Board of Visitors, attended the Oct. 29 groundbreaking ceremony.
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