Building for the Law School: An Architect’s View

W. Kent Cooper

Last summer when I returned to the Law School after twenty-eight years' absence, I was astounded to see how little had changed. I had seen the completed building only once before, in the mid-sixties, and then only briefly. But I was not unfamiliar with the environment, for I had walked the corridors eight hours a day in my imagination for close to a year in 1956. The Law School I knew best was a series of machettes, fragments of space: an auditorium “box” one could peer into; a section of the coffered reading room ceiling; two bays of the folded glass facade; a stepped seminar room. These were a world of cardboard and Plexiglas, populated by cut-out miniature people. It was in this world that

Mr. Cooper is the senior partner of the Washington, D.C. architectural firm, The Cooper-Lecky Partnership, which has been retained by the University to expand the Law School. He is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and Cranbrook Academy of Art (founded by Eliel Saarinen), and he was holder of the Paris Prize. His firm recently received an Architectural Institute of America Honor Award for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

every corner, joint, railing, and window mullion of the new Law School was simulated, studied, and finally perfected.

In 1956, my role was to help Eero Saarinen crystalize and translate his innovative design ideas into reality. Eero’s design for the Law School complex seemed to grow directly out of his earlier master planning work for the University. The Saarinen campus plan of 1955 envisioned the creation of several new quadrangles, two of which he completed personally (the Woodward Court Residence Halls and the Law School). The new Law School was intended to be both contemporary and classic. Eero hoped that it would wear well—both physically and aesthetically—and indeed it has.

The Midway campus has a long-standing romance with Gothic Revival architecture, and Eero felt duty bound to design a structure that would enhance that tradition while at the same time employing the most contemporary materials and technology. He designed the Law School in the same period as the dormitories at Vassar, with their fluted bay windows, and the embassies in Oslo and London, each with its raised faceted facade, and slightly after the circular chapel at MIT, which is vaguely Romanesque in feeling.

At the time we were planning the new Law School, the city of Chicago was planning an east/west depressed freeway in the block just south of Burton-Judson. It was with that prospect in mind that the new school was designed to be viewed mainly from the north. But in the decade following the construction of the school, transportation policies and urban politics collided head on, and the very pleasant lawn lying to the south of the library is one of the residual benefits, our legacy from the abandonment of this controversial cross-town freeway project.

One of the first things I did after receiving the assignment as design captain for the building was to search out the original drawings of the Burton-Judson complex and use them to build a model of the east elevation to which the Law School is tied. Eero intended that the new structure would blend with the established collegiate Gothic character of the campus through the use of materials, structure, and rich detail. The established wall facing material, a shot-faced, warm buff limestone, was selected for the facades. Architecturally, the Gothic was an era of explicit structural expression, and Eero chose exposed reinforced concrete for the structural armature of the complex on
which to hang the limestone. The concrete columns were formed into star shapes—both structurally sound and visually interesting. The floor slabs that hold the weight of the library stacks were visually lightened by coffering them into a pattern of diamonds, each of which was used as a reflector for a bare incandescent light bulb—an interesting blend of form, function, and economy.

During the mid-1950’s Eero was exploring glass curtain wall designs. The glass facade of the Law Library was a fine example. Eero’s partner, architect and engineer John Dinkeloo, had pioneered work in the development of the neoprene gasket glazing for window walls. This system, similar to that which is used in automobile windshields, afforded us an opportunity to execute a visually delicate folded facade with only the bright aluminum “prows” interrupting the sky reflections on the dark gray solar glass. In that era, double glazing would have been a luxury that we did not think would produce savings sufficient ever to break even, so the facade was single glazed. The southwestern facades on the south and west facades were designed to be surfaced with solid panels coated with procelainized aluminum, dark gray in color. When it turned out that we couldn’t get building code approval for this new material, dark gray glass was installed there also, and two generations of faculty have struggled with a variety of shading devices, none of which have quite solved the problem of solar gain, both summer and winter. But the folded glass “Gothic” facade has indeed been outwardly successful, and the Law School has assumed its place as a prize-winning landmark on the Midway.

From the start, we fought a battle with the cost of the Law School building. I can remember cutting the size several times before we finally came within our budget. Interestingly enough, the handsome proportions of the library today are the result of the budgeter’s ax more than of Eero’s original intention. We would have chosen a taller tower, and actually planned for a two-floor upward expansion to take place at a later date.

“...its austerity makes it unique, and in turn somewhat magical.”

The auditorium structure was probably the most difficult design problem of all. Eero struggled with a desire to harmonize this wing with the recently completed American Bar Center but at the same time to “do something worthy of the Midway.” More than twenty concepts were produced before a satisfactory solution was reached. Surpassing the Moot Court—certainly a symbolically important element of the school—into the bowels of the auditorium structure was a difficult call, and we resisted it. At the end, we found ourselves weighing the creation of a stepped theater courtroom in which the choreography of a trial might be observed from a bird’s eye perspective against the strong historic concept of the judicial dais. Each has a learning potential. Did we make the right decision?

During my first visit back to the school last summer, I was asked why we made the school’s structure so austere, and I had to admit I’d never thought of it in that way. In retrospect, I believe this rigor is the school’s joy, and I’d cite the Green Lounge as an example. Last summer, while having my first (styrofoam) plate lunch in that space, I realized that it’s austerity makes it unique, and in turn somewhat magical. There can be no mistake: users do not own that lounge; their claim is quite temporal. Each individual must establish his or her own territory and make it work.

Upon returning to the school I was both amazed and impressed by the loving care that has preserved the design integrity of the building for nearly three decades. Professor Walter Blum has been a watchdog par excellence. Without his care, who knows how many posters might have been affixed to the walls; how many temporary walls constructed.

Today, Gerhard Casper has joined Mr. Blum in his role as protector of the heritage, and together with faculty and friends of the Law School they have planned the renewal and expansion for the eighties.

About a year ago, I found myself once again looking at a model of the Law School. Eero was dead, his successor Kevin Roche had asked me to attempt to respond to the school’s need for expansion. Doubling the capacity of the library was the prime task, but we also needed to solve a host of nagging minor problems.

From the start, we observed that while the classrooms and seminars appeared to serve the student body well, the library and administration blocks were packed beyond sensible utility. We carefully studied numerous expansion alternatives. At one time or another these included (a) moving the Reading Room and stack expansion into a below-grade structure under the south lawn; (b) building a new stack structure on the south lawn; (c) lengthening the classroom wing to the south; and (d) expanding both class and administration wings. But expanding all floors of the library block to the south was clearly the scheme with the soundest cost benefit. More space for stacks, offices, staff, and storage were all needed, and these comprise the contents of the seven-story structure that will be constructed next year. This new addition will nearly double the capacity of the present Library, as well as provide the much needed additional office space, but it will scarcely be visible from the Midway.

At our first planning meeting, I shared my impressions with the faculty planning committee concerning the overcrowded library staff offices; the energy management problems; the need to better assimilate the oncoming library and office communications revolution. Dean Casper firmly reminded me that our task was to expand the Library, not to attempt to solve the myriad large and small maintenance problems which beset any institutional structure as large as this one. And indeed we did focus on the expansion, but at the same time we have seized each and every opportunity to correct problems whenever feasible.
Law School Expansion

The new library addition will have a significant impact on several areas of the school in the years ahead. First, the Green Lounge will be expanded. Enlarging the lounge was certainly not high on the approved program agenda, but it came about as a by-product of the lateral expansion scheme for the library above.

The lounge is perhaps the best architectural space created in the original design. It is both dignified and flexible. But it is also considered by many to be noisy and austere. In recent years, a small snack bar has been developed in what was originally the catering pantry and food service is now a major activity in this space throughout the daytime hours. This has been particularly important since the Law School is somewhat isolated from the other eateries on campus and since food and drink are not permitted in the library. The more formal original furniture was also replaced recently with lighter and more versatile pieces. These changes have turned the space into a lively meeting place.

But as we talked with students last fall, it became clear that there really wasn’t a place where one might both sip a soft drink and study quietly. We therefore devised a plan that will allow a portion of the lounge to be subdivided by glass doors and to become an informal study area while the lively social character of the rest of the Green Lounge remains. This same division will also help at times when small banquets or other separate but simultaneous activities are planned. Both lounge rooms will look out to the north as well as to the south. In addition, on the south side two loggias have been provided for sheltered outdoor activity.

The view south from the new lounge onto the lush green lawn will no longer be bisected by the service drive. A more modest service access will approach the library block from the west parking lot. This will prepare for the orderly construction of a new quadrangle when in future years the University needs additional residential or educational space south of the Midway.

Expanding the Library capacity was, of course, the real focus of our work. This expansion has required delicate surgery so that the institution may continue to function as usual during construction. Some of the planning changes are modest in their nature. Faculty offices and student carrels will still ring the expanded rows of stacks on all the upper floors, much as they do today. But the Reading Room and balcony floors have been reorganized to facilitate new functional needs, providing more space for reserve materials and reference books and for computerized circulation systems and on-line catalogs. An unobtrusive but effective book securing system will ensure that needed research material stays in the library, and a new controlled reserve reading area will make important resources more readily available for student use. The card catalogs will be freed from the wall and made ready for the advent of the on-line catalog systems that will arrive in the next decade. On the balcony, an acoustically isolated and humidity
controlled environment for microform materials will protect them and make them more readily accessible to users. The Law School's fine collection of rare books will also be stored in this protected environment. Throughout the Library on all levels, new and more functional student carrels will be placed.

For many years, the lower lobby and side rooms of the auditorium wing have housed Placement, Development, and Alumni Relations offices. In the expansion program new, well-appointed office space has been provided for these important functions in the lower level of the building. This will free the side rooms of the auditorium wing for ten new student organization offices. A new hallway will connect the lower lobby and corridor of the classroom wing.

To some these changes might sound radical in their impact on this well-loved and cared for environment. But if we do our job well, when the expansion is complete the changes will hardly be noticeable except in the increased convenience and efficiency they will provide.

Keeping our stock of great buildings current and fully functional is a task worthy of our most skillful design attention. I have found it fascinating to return to the Law School after so many years, and to have this opportunity to ensure that it will serve students and faculty well into the next century.