

The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law
CUA Law Scholarship Repository

Scholarly Articles and Other Contributions

Faculty Scholarship

1987

Introduction to Concept Through Construction: Mastering the Art of Law Library Design

Stephen G. Margeton

The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.edu/scholar>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stephen G. Margeton, Introduction to Concept Through Construction: Mastering the Art of Law Library Design, 79 L. LIBR. J. 485 (1987).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at CUA Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Articles and Other Contributions by an authorized administrator of CUA Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact edinger@law.edu.

Concept through Construction: Mastering the Art of Law Library Design

Introduction*

Stephen G. Margeton**

I once saw a project sign, with the usual information about what a new building was and who was doing it...

'Fun' (Architect)

'Money' (Owner)

'Work' (Engineer and Contractor)

I thought that rather clever, and by the time our underground addition was done in 1981, I could have added a fourth line:

'Worry' (Librarian).

Margaret A. Leary

When I first read this description of the building program that would become the remarkable University of Michigan underground law library, I thought, how appropriate! Designing and building a law library does involve considerable worry, particularly when it is one's first experience. Perhaps, however, better preparation is the key to alleviating some of the anxiety.

This thought again flashed in my mind when, several months later, during the summer of 1984, I accepted an invitation from Alan Holoch, chair of the AALL Education Committee, to cochair with Jim Hoover of Columbia University Law Library an institute on law library design and construction. Jim's academic background and the impending renovation of the Columbia Law Library made a fine complement to my law firm experience.

At the time, I was just completing a two-year library construction project at Steptoe & Johnson, a Washington, D.C., law firm. I hoped that the experience had prepared me to share many useful but hard-learned tips. Jim, on the other hand, was facing a major academic renovation. He already had devoted much time to large-scale space planning, and was thinking about early design stages. This is not to say that Jim and I had all the answers. In many instances we had none. But we believed that each of us could offer institute attendees useful insights into the design and building process. Certainly, if nothing else, we could caution attendees about what not to do.

* © Stephen G. Margeton, 1987.

** Librarian, Supreme Court of the United States, Washington, D.C.

We realized that such a program should enlist the combined experience of many law librarian colleagues who, over the years, had worked on a variety of construction and expansion projects. We also wanted help from outside the library world, from the technical professions absolutely essential to library design and construction.

In 1984 it seemed that there was somewhat of a law library building boom. I knew of a number of law firms which were just completing or in the midst of planning new law libraries. Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington, D.C., all boasted new law library space. The same held true for academic institutions and, to some extent, government agencies. Thus, we expected there would be a strong interest in a timely institute, particularly since there seemed to be few instructional materials on designing law libraries. Another important reason for the program was that librarians were facing numerous technological changes in their facilities—changes that affected every library operation from research and communications to ergonomics and book storage.

Much of the eventual success of any institute must be attributed to local arrangements librarians. In our case, AALL was fortunate to receive an invitation to bring the institute to Tempe, Arizona, in the beautiful southwest. Symbolically for us, Tempe was near the winter home of architect Frank Lloyd Wright. The program was scheduled for January 1986. Local arrangements were organized by Richard Brown of Arizona State University Law Library and Elizabeth Schneider of Maricopa County Law Library in Phoenix. Working with extremely hospitable committees from both institutions, the cochairs promised participants pleasant evening events and warm January weather. We were not to be disappointed on either account.

With local arrangements proceeding smoothly, Jim and I began to plan the institute. We both agreed that lectures and work sessions should try to address every type of law library organization—court, firm, academic, bar, government agency—and highlight the design problems each might face. We also decided that some of the sessions would be general and others would be more specialized. In like manner, the enrollment would consist of an interesting cross-section of participants whose questions would represent many library construction dilemmas.

We also wished to distribute a useful course handbook. Through the cooperation of a number of institutions, publishers, speakers, and vendors, we achieved much of what we intended. Using the Library of Congress's on-line catalog, we were able to easily prepare and print special bibliographies; the Library of Congress Division for the Blind supplied materials on planning library facilities for the handicapped; several publishers and design firms permitted the replication of sample blueprints, charts and checklists; and many of the speakers supplied thought-provoking, instructional materials.

The speakers who were selected represented all the necessary professions: architecture, engineering, interior design, new technology, furniture manufacturing, and law firm administration. From among our colleagues we were fortunate to draw the most experienced law library planners; the group included firm librarians, academics, and court law librarians; those who designed from scratch and those who rehabilitated older edifices; those who had moved vast libraries into new space and those who had moved smaller libraries but moved them again and again into ever-changing, renovated space. Jim and I believed that we had enlisted a superb panel, most of whom, incidentally, agreed to speak on several different topics.¹

Because it was necessary to cater to many kinds of librarians, the program was organized in a variety of formats: large groups and small groups, panels, lectures, and special sessions; participants were coming and going in all directions. If energy permitted, each participant was able to attend every presentation.

Library design generally implies the use of graphics—drawings, lines, pictures, models, and product samples. Thus, Jim and I imagined a program which to some degree would lend itself to multimedia. Through the courtesy of the American Institute of Architects we were able to exhibit slides of award-winning libraries from all over the United States. From the Boston firm of Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson & Abbott we borrowed an excellent film entitled *Of Things to Come*, a documentary that chronicled the life of an actual library design and construction project. From more than forty vendors we received hundreds of packets of information to distribute. The material topics ranged from selecting architects and carpeting to planning signage and security systems. Naturally, we also included handouts on movers, lockers, furniture and, of course, library shelving.

Such an undertaking involves a great many people who are willing to lend their time and talent. Jim and I would like to thank again the many who worked so hard to ensure a worthwhile program. What did we learn? We learned that there is a great deal to learn, and usually in an unrealistic time frame; that building is an exciting process; that the worst design problems do have answers; and that a lot can be learned from experienced craftsmen and professionals. I hope that the papers which follow will give some of the flavor of the actual presentations and serve as useful tools when your time comes . . . to build!

1. Included in the following symposium is George Grossman's article, "Housing Books." This article is based on a speech given at the Institute on Cost Effective Collection Storage and Preservation, sponsored by the Law Library Microfilm Consortium, held in Honolulu in July, 1984.