

Glorius Adaptive Reuse

Historic downtown building is new home of University of Memphis School of Law

By D.R. Jones

In January 2010, the University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law moved from the main campus of the University of Memphis into its new home in the magnificent, historic U.S. Customs House, Court House, and Post Office in downtown Memphis. The building, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980, is located on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River. The State of Tennessee provided \$42 million for the renovation, and the university also obtained an additional \$6 million in private support for the building acquisition.

The five-level, 169,000-square-foot building, which was built in three stages from the 1880s through 1929, was completely renovated and adapted to meet the needs of the law school. Prior to the renovation, the space had most recently served as offices, workspace, and public service areas for the Post Office. The renovation designer was a joint venture between Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects and Fleming Associates Architects. William S. Nixon, architect and project director, characterized the renovation as an “excellent demonstration of adaptive reuse.” This work combines preservation of historical features with additions and changes suited for a different purpose and modern needs.

The results of the creative adaptive reuse are visible throughout the Plough Law Library, named for The Plough Foundation, a major donor to the capital campaign. The law library, which occupies most of five levels of the south side of the building, showcases many historical architectural features and areas. At the same time, the law library has several reading rooms (including two informal seating areas), study rooms,

two computer labs, five miles of shelving (including compact shelving), a microform room, a rare book room, law library offices, workspaces, and library service areas.

Historic Preservation

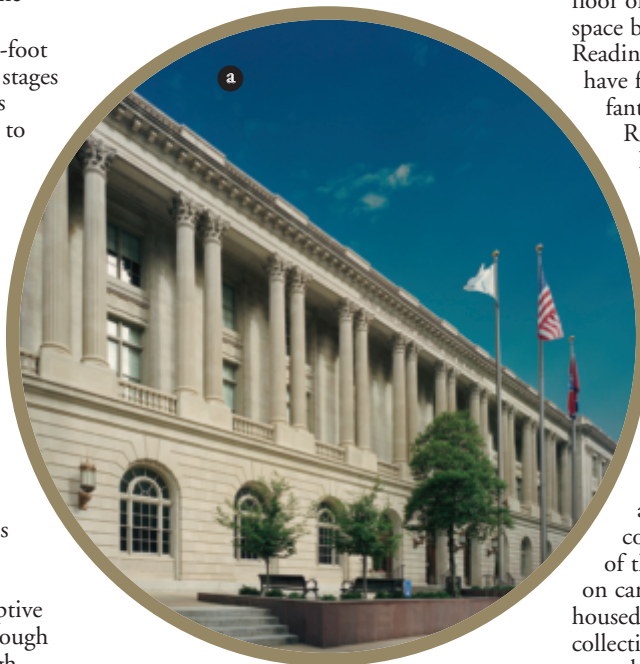
For historic preservation, the architects worked with the Tennessee State Historic Preservation Office to identify and restore historical elements throughout the building and law library. This included the Tennessee marble flooring in the entrance to the law library, original light fixtures and doors, original marble and

safety needs. All areas had to meet current codes, including the *Americans with Disabilities Act*. In addition, the building was updated to meet stringent seismic requirements because Memphis is in the New Madras fault zone.

In adapting the space, the architects transformed many areas. The most unusual transformation was the conversion of an original Post Office security vault into a small study room. The architects also converted two open rooftops into terraces, one of which students can access from the library. One of the most dramatic spatial transformations occurred in the top attic floor of the building. This former storage space became the Gordon Ball Scenic Reading Room. Three sides of the room have floor-to-ceiling glass windows with fantastic views of the Mississippi River and the Hernando DeSoto Bridge, which spans the river. The space serves as a library reading room and also as a reception area for events. For example, early this year the new Tennessee governor recently held his first regional jobs roundtable in the reading room.

Improvements Throughout

The move to the new building allowed the law library to consolidate its collection. A portion of the collection had been in storage on campus, and the university library housed most of the law library's collection of historic materials. Lack of space had resulted in disorganization. The law library's reunited collection now occupies five miles of shelving, including compact, manually operated shelving on the lowest level of the library. Historic and fragile materials are now housed in the Rare Book Room, which includes original doors and light fixtures.



wood wainscot paneling, and decorative plaster ceilings. While restoring the historic features of the building, the biggest challenge was in providing a completely new infrastructure for power, data, wireless, plumbing, HVAC, and



The new library space stands in sharp contrast to the library space in the old building. The old law library space was cramped and dark, with cold cinderblock walls and few windows. One law student described the old space as “subterranean.” There were very few seating options, with choices of old, worn carrels or uncomfortable newer furniture crowded in tiny rooms. Most library staff space existed in windowless bunker-like rooms. The new library is ablaze with light from large, two-story windows. All public, student, and staff areas feature these windows that give wonderful natural light to those spaces. In addition, the soaring high ceilings offer an open feeling.

The law school and library received elegant new furniture for all areas including offices. The selection of the public furniture for the law library focused on complementing the historic space while providing for modern needs. D.R. Jones, law library director, located a 1913 photo of the local county law library. The Worden Company custom-designed chairs to match those in the photo and also custom-designed traditional tables with a modern convenience: pop-up electrical outlets for laptops and extra table legs to hide electrical cords.

Student Focus

The law library serves many types of patrons, including local bar members and

the public. As architect William S. Nixon states, however, “in the design of the building we leaned very heavily in favor of the students.” The student focus is strongly present throughout the law library. Students have a plethora of choices for study and workspaces.

Third year student Nic Vescovo observes that “there is no shortage of places for students to find the quiet and calm needed when tackling a new legal concept.” There are group study rooms with white boards, two-person study rooms, large tables with power outlets, carrels, informal seating space, open lounge seating, two computer labs, additional computers in carrels, smaller tables, the Ball Scenic Reading Room, the Rare Book Room, and even the vault, the most private study space. Wireless internet access is available throughout the law library.

The law library’s access policies also reflect a strong student focus. There are no food or drink restrictions in the library. The law school building and library are open 24/7/365 for students, faculty, and staff through the use of their university ID swipe cards for access. Full-time security guards monitor entrance into and around the entire building. The new library space gets heavy usage throughout the school year.

Many of the prized study areas in the library offer sweeping views of the Mississippi River. There are spectacular

sunsets to watch as well as river traffic. Are those views distracting? Student Nic Vescovo offers this observation: “When stumped by a difficult legal issue, gazing at the river often provides mental clarity.” He adds that the law library is “truly a new gem for the law school and the University of Memphis.” ■

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Captions:

Photo a: The historic Customs House, Court House, and Post Office in downtown Memphis is the new home of the University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law.

Photo credit: Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects Inc.

Photo b: The attic of the Customs House, Court House, and Post Office became the Gordon Ball Scenic Reading Room.

Photo courtesy of Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects Inc.

Photo c: The main reading room of the law library faces the circulation and reference desk and is ablaze with light from large, two-story windows.

Photo by Rhonda Cosentino.

Photo d: The river view windows, from which the lights of the Hernando DeSoto Bridge are visible, are very popular study areas for students.

Photo by Rhonda Cosentino.

Photo e: The Gordon Ball Scenic Reading Room serves as both a reading room and a reception area.

Photo courtesy of Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects Inc.