

University of Puerto Rico Law Library Renovation Marries Architecture and Technology

Planning for a substantial expansion and a complete renovation of existing space for the University of Puerto Rico Law Library began in early 1991. Space and budgetary considerations dictated a two-story expansion of approximately 26,000 square feet toward the front of the existing law-school complex, a project that would result in more than 74,000 square feet dedicated to the law library.

The law school and law library are both housed in a building designed by Henry Klumb in the mid-1960s and expanded in the late 1970s. Klumb's buildings dominate one portion of the Rio Piedras Campus. As a disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright, Klumb's works are noted for their modern, organic nature complementing the tropical setting. His designs all share certain common traits: asymmetrical forms, horizontality, curving planes, and brise-soleil ("sun breaks"), which play with light and shadow and welcome an interplay between exteriors and interiors.

The challenges of a substantial expansion included satisfying architectural critics, who are suspicious of any intervention with original Klumb designs, and planning how new space could be incorporated into the original plan, thereby making the old space more functional. Other design considerations included maintaining the sense that the law library and the rest of the law school complex were all part of a common enterprise. The design also had to provide a suitable location for "La Madrugada," a 63-foot-by-17-foot modern tapestry which had been transferred to the law library. Practical design considerations included a reconfiguration of staff space

and the incorporation of technology throughout the law library.

To meet these challenges, the architects chose to move the entrance to the law library, keeping the new entrance off the main law-school patio. This was accomplished with an entrance gallery leading to a new circulation and reserve counter. This area featured an "air-lock" design to segregate this noisy service point from the law-library proper. After passing through the circulation area, a three-story, trapezoid-shaped atrium joins the old and new portions of the law library. "La Madrugada," depicting a sunrise with the poem of the same title superimposed in modern



The University of Puerto Rico Law Library's exterior at night illustrates the interplay between light and shadow as well as exterior and interior decor.

calligraphy, hangs on the second and third floor levels of one of the longest walls. Opposite the tapestry wall, a marble staircase provides an unobstructed view of the tapestry while providing access to the second and third floors. On one of the smaller sides of the atrium, there is a three-story window whose base terminates in an exterior-interior pond. An impressive, semicircular reference station dominates the small side of the trapezoid and serves as a central switching point between old and new sections of the law library.



The second-floor periodicals area features small pockets of table seating between shelving to reduce noise and provide patrons easy access to traditional resources.

Off the atrium, there are three relatively small computer rooms, reflecting the increasing number of students using notebook computers and plugging into one of the many wired tables, open carrels, one-person study rooms, and group study rooms distributed throughout the library. In lieu of large reading room configurations

of seating, small pockets of carrel and table seating lay between ranges of shelving. This strategy not only reduces noise but also places patrons within close proximity to traditional resources. We selected the DeGilde line by the Worden Co. for tables and carrels because of that line's inherently modern style, which emphasizes a horizontality consistent with Klumb's building design. The potential starkness of this modern style was balanced and softened by selecting a rich cherry wood finish for both tables and carrels as well as shelving end panels.

While very striking from the exterior, the original Klumb interior design was not well adapted to either public or technical services functions. The new design allowed a utilitarian placement of circulation and reference service points with heavily used materials within close proximity of the reference station. It also allowed all technical



The atrium features "La Madrugada," a 63-foot-by-17-foot tapestry depicting a sunrise and a poem of the same name.

services functions to be located within close proximity to one another. To give more visibility to the often-overlooked technical services departments, large glass windows separate these departments from the general reference area — an effect similar to a restaurant with an "open kitchen."

The new law library, along with other expanded and renovated areas of the law school and legal clinic, was formally rededicated in late January 2001 with Associate Justice Stephen Breyer as the featured speaker and guest of honor.

P. Michael Whipple (pwhipple@upracd.upr.clu.edu) is director and professor of law at the University of Puerto Rico Law Library in San Juan.