

Experiences

in Temporary Digs Inform Design for Permanent Library

by Julie Tessmer

Rare Book Room: The maple cabinets were designed to accommodate a variety of materials. The shelves are adjustable, the lower section has pull-out drawers, and the upper section houses oversized books. A separate HVAC system was installed to preserve the materials, which date back to the early 1600s.

The Wisconsin State Law Library, the oldest library in the state, resided in the state Capitol for more than a century. In 1987, an extensive Capitol renovation project began, with the library slated to move to a new location and its old space converted into legislative offices. Although the library's original area in the Capitol and subsequent temporary space was less than ideal for the library, it did help drive the design of the new permanent library.

In September 1999, the library and its staff were forced out of its Capitol

approached, it was time to leave. Sixteen staffers moved to four offices in two different buildings and kept reference services operational from a fifth location. The book collection remained in the Capitol's East Wing, now closed to the public but accessible to library staff.



Reference/Work Area: This inviting area, filled with natural light, is the center of user services.



Reading Room: The arched ceiling in the Reading Room is reminiscent of a skylight in the Capitol. Maple tables are equipped with data and power connections. The table lamps are similar to those used in the library around the turn of the century.

In November 1999, the Wisconsin Building Commission confirmed that the permanent library would be in the Risser Justice Center, a new state office building for the Wisconsin Department of Justice and several legislative offices. The staff began moving the collection to the temporary location in late November. Staff followed in mid-December.

However, crews were still working on the temporary location. It was literally being designed as it was being built. The design team of Peter Bloomfield, Susan Chisholm and Gil Rosenthal of Bloomfield & Associates/WRT worked feverishly with State Law Librarian Marcia J. Koslov to complete drawings for a law library facility that had to function for at least two years until the permanent library space was

location even though a temporary location for the library had not yet been chosen. The staff tried to stay in the original space as long as they could, despite major construction, to avoid multiple moves of 120,000 volumes. When the water was turned off in the library wing and winter

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ready. The plan was to develop what was once a department store into a temporary home for the law library. Carpenters, painters and electricians worked around us. Construction delays forced us to box half the collection temporarily. We opened with rented tables and chairs for the public spaces in December 1999. Construction on the temporary location was completed about three months after the library and its staff moved in.

In the meantime, I worked with the architects and law library consultant Joan Axelroth to design the new permanent library. We talked about what was and wasn't working in the temporary space. The temporary space had problematic architectural issues. Staff had difficulty seeing all the patron access stations from the reference desk, and the librarian in charge of reference could not see the desk from her office. Reference and circulation desks were at opposite sides of a circular lobby. People who entered the library were unsure which desk to approach for assistance; circulation activities often interfered with reference conversations. We debated how to divide the staff and the collection between the two floors and discussed the important proximities.

We also took into consideration the architectural problems from the Capitol building. In the Capitol, the collection was spread out in dozens of stack areas. One

goal for the new library was to design a layout that arranged almost everything into call-number order. We wanted to eliminate such locations as "near vault" and "3rd floor" to make it easier for users to find materials. The old Capitol space also had narrow aisles, low archways and poor lighting, making the library feel darker and smaller.

The construction and renovation of the new permanent library space took two years to complete. The result is a two-floor library that features open spaces optimal for precisely categorizing the collection.

The square footage of the library and linear feet of shelving almost doubled. A book security system and internal restrooms and elevator all boost security. The library now has seating for more than 100 users. Tables are wired for data and power connections. Perhaps the greatest advantage to the new space is that, for the first time in a decade, the entire collection is in one place.

The new library's circulation lobby acts as a hub to direct users to other areas. To the left is a large reading room with an arched ceiling reminiscent of one of the library's rooms in the Capitol. The room is unique because it has the intimacy of a quiet study room without walls; only pillars divide the tables from surrounding stack areas. To the right is the reference/

work area, with the reference desk, the reference book collection, four public access stations and a current periodical/newspaper reading area. This part of the library bustles with activity and conversation. All shelving in this area is low, giving reference staff a clear view of patron access stations. Low bookshelves serve as countertops to spread out materials and allow more natural light and an unobstructed view of the lake.

The Rare Book Room houses law books from the early 1600s and serves as a meeting and reception area. In the Capitol, rare books — in various closets, cabinets and offices — were inaccessible to users. The room and its furnishings protect the volumes but also display them elegantly.

The new Wisconsin State Law Library opened its doors on Jan. 22. As our architect once stated, our goal was to build another 100-year library. The library celebrated its new home and 166th anniversary with an April 19 reception during National Library Week.

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