

# They Said It

After years in the library doldrums, trapped by level funding from the state and escalating prices from legal publishers, the Oregon Supreme Court Library in Salem, Ore., was miraculously rescued by the state legislature, which provided an assessment against state agencies to help pay for its operations. In 1998, the chief justice appointed a planning committee to determine how to spend the new funding. The committee recommended renovating the facility to modern law library standards "consistent with the character of the 1914 Supreme Court Building," of which it occupies the entire second floor.

This would not be easy. The library's last structural change was in 1941, when mezzanine-like balconies were added over the stacks on both sides of the central area to provide additional shelf space for 25 more years. Clearly we would not be able to alter the general configuration; though we had hoped to add shelf space by using compact shelving in some areas, this was not structurally feasible. At best, we could avoid losing shelf space.

The library had last been painted and carpeted in the '70s. The walls were painted in a truly awful combination of

by Joe K. Stephens



*The Oregon Supreme Court Library occupies the second floor of the Oregon Supreme Court Building, which was built in 1914.*

Photos courtesy of D.J. Morrison



*Before remodel: The shop lights and harvest gold decor date back to the 1970s.*

# Couldn't Be Done ...

harvest gold and daffodil, complemented by mottled brown carpet. Situated in the middle of the main floor, the combination reference/circulation desk and library work area, known as "the cage," was the focal point of the room. The cage was a 12-foot-by-18-foot enclosed '70s structure consisting of dark wood for the counter, glass panels that reached the low ceiling, and Trak lighting. The cage dated back to a time when the Judicial Department took over the library work room for the Personnel Division. All of this

fixtures. They were cooperative when we asked for many changes on functional grounds ... until funding fell through.

We hoped to fund the project through the Department of Administrative Services' building maintenance fund, but DAS turned us down on a technicality: It did not own the building. However, we were nearing the end of the biennium with money in the assessment fund and thought we could still complete a good part of the renovation. When we met with the architects to decide what we had enough money to do, to our



*After remodel: The center of the main floor appears more spacious with low shelving, soft lights and paint, and new carpet.*



*Before remodel: The infamous "cage" at the entrance to library served as the reference/circulation desk.*

within the lovely old architectural space framed by soaring Ionic columns. Even worse, in a misguided attempt to provide more light, the original light fixtures had been replaced with "shop lights," the kind used to light a garage workshop or basement laundry room. And of course, there were about four electrical outlets in the whole library.

We called on a Portland interior architect well-known for beautiful renovations of historical buildings, including several libraries. The firm's architects were delighted to plan the restoration. After researching what the library would have looked like in 1914, they designed the library to look like an 18th-century drawing room. They created an elegant 4-color paint scheme and planned on designing custom furniture and light

surprise, they fired us — probably reluctant to have their name on a project that might not be up to their standards.

We did not let this setback stop us. First, we had to decide exactly what to attempt — and we wanted it all: painting, carpeting, shelving, furniture, lighting and maybe most of all, wiring. We succeeded in lining up contractors to handle each aspect of the project — finding out in the process that really ugly carpeting and furnishings are abundant even in a small city like Salem. We had also learned a good deal from the architects and incorporated some of their suggestions:

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*After remodel: The new reference/circulation desk area features low shelving and carrels.*

e.g., moving most seating near the windows; replacing library tables that would have served well in a school library with carrels in the early 20th-century Mission style; and wiring those carrels for power outlets and data ports. The central architectural area of the library framed by Ionic columns was left more open by removing the cage and using counter-height shelving. We covered the old garish paint with a soft white, trimmed in an austere gray to match the Carrera marble of the lobby. A local woodworker built a custom

reference desk of solid mahogany that looks as though it could have been in the original 1914 library.

Our hard work created a beautiful and functional interior, to all appearances historically correct but fully able to accommodate current technology. And renovation expenses turned out to be only about half the cost projected by the architects.

We are very pleased with the result. But I feel a little bit like I used to feel at

Christmas after spending the entire day assembling toys from instructions written by people for whom English was not a native language: Now that I've done it, I will know how to do it if I ever have to do it again – but it's very unlikely I'll do it again.

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