

# Teamwork

## Builds a Modern Traditional Library

by Mitchell Counts  
and Robert Linz



A trench for network wiring is cut into the floor of the Reading Room, which looks like an abandoned warehouse.

The Ave Maria School of Law was built on the premise that law and morality are inextricably linked and that modern jurists must renew the study of the traditional foundations of law in their legal educations. With deep respect for these traditional foundations, its library was designed to house an extensive print collection in the areas of ethics and the law, the natural law, and the Catholic intellectual tradition, while providing its constituencies with access to numerous electronic databases and a plethora of network connections.

Most new law schools start out in abandoned Wal-Marts, Kmart, or elementary and high schools. Often, the problem with these facilities is a lack of green space and an overabundance of concrete. The Ave Maria School of Law, however, was fortunate to acquire an 84,500 square-foot building in northeast Ann Arbor, Mich., on 11 acres of green space and federally protected wetlands. The building once served as a corporate headquarters for an environmental testing company.

As the newly appointed director in December 1999, Mitch Counts was introduced to 27,000 square feet of library space that looked like the floor of a warehouse that was ready to be torn down. Counts could see the potential, however. He envisioned the former product

testing area as a large 1-1/2-story reading room. Rooms that once housed professional offices could easily be transformed into multiple group study areas. Entryways for service vehicles could become large, bright windows to illuminate both stacks and technical services areas.

To assist in design and construction, the law school hired a team of local experts in architecture, interior design, construction and telecommunications. Counts hired Robert Linz as information technology coordinator to assist the team not only in the design of the information technology suite and infrastructure, but also in identifying and hiring other staff.

As with all projects involving multiple parties and perspectives, communication was key to the successful completion of this project. Working with an architectural firm that had no prior experience building or renovating an academic law library was the first obstacle to overcome. To help the firm understand the importance of proper space planning in a law library, the library staff educated the architect about the basic terminology and functions of various library areas, including circulation and technical services. For example, "staff computer training" room had to be changed on the architectural plans to the "instructional computer lab"; the "resident librarian's office" became "catalog librarian's office." While the architects were more interested in "form over function," the library staff was more interested in "function over form."

Working with the interior designer proved to be a lesson in trust and judgment.



The Reading Room is now complete with cherry wood furniture and green plants.

There were some disagreements throughout the life of the project over colors, chair choices, and office and computer lab furniture, but our selective deference to her professional judgment was wise: The library now conveys both a professional and inviting environment. One particular point of contention was the interior designer's choice of the red European "womb" chairs at the entryway of the library. Though the director preferred a more traditional leather chair look, he ultimately accepted the interior designer's choice — and he was glad he did. The students definitely like the splash of color and contemporary style it adds to all the cherry wood furniture.

During construction, the construction crew maintained office space at the law school. The construction of the law school was completed in stages; library staff members worked in one part of the building while the library was being finished. The challenge of working with the construction crew was that they didn't report to the library staff but to the architects. Thus, revisions and status reports had to go through the architects, which sometimes muddled communication and lengthened deadlines.

All problems surmounted, the law library opened its doors to students and faculty in September 2000.



Students relaxing in the "womb" chairs.

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With every team member's help, the library provides its patrons with an elegant yet comfortable environment that blends the traditional and the modern. Through the use of drop ceilings and floor trench construction, information technology runs throughout the library to the wired study carrels, tables and computer labs. "I find our library to be the best of the old and the new," says Jim Fox, a second-year student. "There is nothing like sitting among cherry wood furniture and reading the legal classics or surfing the Internet in my carrel and exploring a recent [Federal Communications Commission] ruling."

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