O
opened in 1973 during a
time of student unrest
and anti-war protest,
the University at Buffalo Law
School building in O’Brian Hall
was intentionally designed not
to provide open, welcoming
spaces where groups of students
could gather. However, the law
school’s Charles B. Sears Law
Library has been able to
distinguish itself from the rest of
the building by gradually and
cost-effectively converting its
three-story reading room into
a lofty, bright and open space
without interrupting the law
library’s operations.

Over time, O’Brian Hall has
faced all the problems and
limitations expected of a 30-
year-old law school building. Because of a
variety of concerns ranging from campus
politics to the cost of possible asbestos
abatement, a major renovation is not possible
at this time. However, via careful planning
and
by exploiting
opportunities as they
have arisen, both
the law school and
the law library
have been able to
conduct a campaign
of incremental
remodeling projects
to create an
“information
commons.” The
consolidation of
electronic and printed
research resources,
combined with
updated furnishings,
has transformed
O’Brian Hall into a
facility comparable to
any law school in the
country.

The UB law
library occupies the
six upper floors of O’Brian Hall, surrounding
a central atrium. The two-level main reading
room occupies the second and third floors
of the building. The third floor is a large
mezzanine level. Group conference rooms are
available on every floor. Individual study
carrels are located on three floors. But the
upper floors provide little open study area.

The main reading room has always been
the most popular study area in the library.
Even that space, however, suffered from years
of neglect. The original furniture,
an increasingly decrepit holdover of early
1970s design, remained in use long past its
functional life.

Bringing Resources Together
Seamlessly
Three years ago, the law library moved
the law school’s computer lab into the
law library. After discussing possible
configurations and their service implications,
the law library settled on the goal of bringing
electronic and paper resources together
seamlessly. To that end, the law library
decided to create an “information commons”
by moving most of the law school computer
lab into the reading room. Rather than
segregating computers into a separate room,
the library integrated them directly into the
third-floor reading room surrounding the
atrium, among the core collection of law
journals, regional reporters and state primary
materials and within sight of the reference
and circulation desks.

Creating an
Information
Commons

Without Resources to
Remodel, Buffalo Law
Library Combines
Electronic, Paper Resources
in Innovative Design

by James Milles

Additional
workstations were
grouped on the fifth
and sixth floors. To
maintain the visual
appeal and open feel
of the reading room
space, the law library
selected Nova
workstations with
recessed monitors
rather than a bulky
desktop-monitor
configuration. Each
workstation was
supplied with a desk
lamp to allow users
to adjust the lighting
to their own needs.

The move into
the law library took
about two weeks
in the fall semester of
2000. Because the
new equipment was moved into existing
space, library operations were not disrupted
except for a small amount of noise as the
workstations were assembled. Although
the computers were not available for users
during that time, students were not seriously
inconvenienced because public computer labs
in the other university libraries were nearby.
Once the computer labs in the law library were set up, the students forgave the delay in service.

Most faculty and students were very pleased with the addition of student computing to the library’s services. One or two faculty initially complained that the presence of computers would change the atmosphere of the library from a place of quiet study to a boisterous computer lab. However, as students continued to frequent the library for research and study, the change was soon accepted.

Second Stage: Updating Furniture

Last year the law library decided to build on this initial improvement by replacing its outdated reading room furniture. Because the reading room was a relatively small space, the cost to purchase new tables and chairs was affordable. The law library replaced the old Formica and pressboard study tables with elegant, art and crafts-style tables, chairs and lounge furniture.

Working with Dana Griffith of Wm. P. Curtiss and Company, the library selected a line of Agati chairs and custom oak reading tables. Each table was outfitted with an attractive and sturdy lamp with electrical outlets on the base. In conjunction with the law school and the university libraries, the law library installed wireless ports at the same time, thus greatly increasing network access for the law students and furthering the library’s goal of seamless access to research sources. Once again, through close coordination with university facilities services and the vendor, disruption was kept to a minimum. The entire installation was completed in March 2002 during the law school’s spring break. The old tables were disassembled and removed in one day. Delivery and installation of the new furniture took less than two days. Although the lamps did not arrive for a couple of weeks, that did not prevent students from using the new tables in the interim.

Faculty and students were amazed by the difference. Students remarked that the new furniture gave the library a professional yet more inviting look. While many other law libraries report decreasing usage, most seats in the University at Buffalo law library’s reading room are occupied from morning to night.

Increased Library Use — Including Noise

The improvements have helped to greatly increase use of the law library — for both good and ill. In keeping with the ideal of an information commons, the library staff successfully created an environment conducive to collaborative work. The second-floor reading room is always full. The third floor, adjacent to the computer workstations, bustles with activity.

The bad news is that the third floor can get noisy. The library staff encourages students seeking a silent study environment to use the upper floors, but those floors are simply not as attractive as the second and third floors. The library hopes to improve the upper floors in the near future, but until then, a subtle campaign of well-placed “Quiet Study Area” signs and occasional interventions by library staff have helped to reduce complaints about noise.

Acknowledged as one of the most aesthetically pleasing yet functional spaces in the law school among faculty and students, the law library is often used for various social gatherings, such as the law library’s annual First-Year Welcome Reception, periodic events honoring faculty authors, and the law school’s alumni and admissions branches. An unanticipated benefit of the law library’s layout is that the existing book stacks provide effective sound dampening, so that a reception on the far end of the second floor is barely audible in the front of the second floor or on the third floor directly above.

Without undertaking a major remodeling, these incremental renovations have helped the law library maintain its role at the center of the law school even in the midst of rapid changes in technology and legal education.

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