

# There's no place like

The new University of Minnesota Law School was 8 years in planning and construction. It has 244,000 square feet of space, of which 72 percent is usable. For comparison Fraser Hall had 60,000 square feet of space. The new building cost \$13.8 million dollars; 12.8 million was appropriated by the legislature and approximately 1 million was financed by private contributors including individuals, law firms and foundations. Bricks outside the main entrance commemorate contributions of \$500 and plaques outside of the various classrooms and offices pay tribute to larger donations.

The building saves 3-1/3 billion BTU's per year over the requirements of the state energy code.

The building was designed with several purposes in mind. It had to be an office building, classroom facility, courtroom building, administrative hall, legal aid clinic, and community meeting place. In addition it had to contain a 400,000 volume library, the seventh largest law library in the country, with the capacity to expand to 600,000 volumes.

The architect was Leonard S. Parker. What follows is a discussion with Mr. Parker about the conception, development, and birth of the new—as yet unnamed—building.

**QUAERE:** Where are you from, Mr. Parker?

**Parker:** I'm originally from Milwaukee. I went to Architecture school here at Minnesota and did graduate work at MIT. I worked for six years for Eero Saarinen, the famous architect in Washington, and opened my own office here in 1958. I started teaching here at the University in 1959. Right now I'm a professor in the Graduate School of Architecture.

**Q:** Did you work on Saarinen's construction at the University of Chicago, and did that influence you at all?

**P:** Well, it familiarized me with the issues in building a law school, and many of them are still here today. Same kind of problems then as there are now. There is a difference in terms of technologies that are available now. Retrieval, for instance, and the electronic gadgetry that goes with it.

**Q:** What other buildings have you done in this area that people might have seen?

**P:** Elliot Hall, on the east bank (Psychology Building), and the Field House at the U of M Duluth. The Field House has won three awards, and the Psychology building two. Also the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Gelco office building in Eden Prairie, the Jewish Community Center in St. Paul, and a number of housing projects and single family residences. A very diversified practice.

**Q:** (While walking along the corridor) What about the classrooms downstairs?

**P:** You mean why are they there?

**Q:** Yes.

**P:** One of the requirements of the program was to encourage dialogue in classrooms, and so the best we could do was to get people around the table, so they can talk. When you have 120 people this becomes more of an issue. So what we did was to design the classrooms in a horseshoe shape, and then tiered the steps so that people could see without looking at the back of the head in front of them. Structurally, the tiering of steps would have been very, very costly if we had done it on a level above grade. If we do it down on soil, it can form the soil, so it was a cost concern. The other thing is that classroom functions are internal, introverted. There's no real reason for being exposed to the outside so this might be an attribute. So, if you put it underground—except in 60 classrooms—they get light through monitors like this so the room has a sense of natural daylight. But the room is an enclosed and underground space.

**Q:** Why are there open spaces between the first and second floors?

**P:** The idea is to psychologically and in a real sense relate these spaces by spatial manipulation. For instance, on the second floor there is an area that first of all describes the route that people move. Because there's a better feeling when you walk in a high space than in a low space. Secondly, the same functions that are occurring here are occurring above. In a sense that people become aware that there is more of the same on a second level. The only time we do that penetration of space between floors is where there are

related activities that occur at the point of penetration.

**Q:** Is that the reason for the special staircase between floors 1 and 2?

**P:** That's one reason. The other is that they wanted to have access to periodicals on the upper level so that they can move through the building vertically by a stairway all the way from the ground floor to the fourth floor. And a transfer point so you don't have to leave the controlled area in order to get to the second level.

**Q:** What about the vertical space—the vertical planes—in the building? There's been considerable comment that it's difficult to get up and down in this building, and that you have to use one of the far end staircases, so there's no central focal point.

**P:** The one focus stair is the one that ties the second floor, the plaza level, and the subplaza level. This is where most of the activity related to students and faculty occurs. That stairway is extremely generous to accommodate a lot of movement up and down once the building gets into operation. The other concern as to where we located stairways has to do with library security. As a matter of fact, there isn't a library anywhere that has solved the problem effectively, because if people want to take books out, they will. But librarians are very security conscious about their collections.

**Q:** You mentioned the large prominent stairway at the west end of the building. One of the complaints is that you have to walk all the way across the building to get to it.

**P:** That's very simply a security issue. What they're trying to do is contain the library—which is spread out over 4 floors—so that once a person enters through the controlled desk, the only way he can get out is through the controlled desk.

**Q:** On the second level we have the space overlooking the reading and a lot of open space. Some people say it acts as a noise funnel.

**P:** That's a quiet space, and this is a quiet space. Why would noise be an issue?

**Q:** Because some people stand at railings and talk, and what happens in these hallways is distracting.

**P:** We don't conceive of it being a hallway. It's part of the space that has a separate function. Law Review has to be contained. Certainly administrative offices and library offices have to be contained. And our thought was that this would be better in an open sort of thing than in a closed corridor. Some practical things have to be taken into account, but you try to look at architecture as art and go one step further by making the experience of moving from one activity to another a good experience.

**Q:** Would you say that these open spaces are for the soul?

**P:** To some extent, yes.

**Q:** I think that if you had closed this (second floor hall) and brought the offices right out to these columns you would have had more space here. You would have a more dramatic separation—a wall—but you wouldn't really have lost your hallway.

**P:** Well, that's one kind of hallway. It goes back to an earlier comment. I think it's a very dramatic part of the building. First of all, spatially it gives you a feeling of expansiveness which you wouldn't have if we'd moved it over. Secondly, it relates the activities on the first floor with the activities on this floor. You see the same kind of stacks there that you do here, and that gives you orientation.

**Q:** Some people have commented that the activity in Willy Hall is distracting.

**P:** This is what we're talking about. They have an option—they don't have to sit here.

**Q:** It seems as if you have attempted to create a variety of study spaces—the large reading room, the internal stacks.

**P:** Yes, we've tried to create options to students. Most libraries, particularly law libraries, have two options: one is a central reading space and the other is the carrel. The traditional reading room is here, the carrel is here, but we've also created two other environments—the reading areas along the step area on the outside of the building, and the tables in the bowels of the stacks. Students have four options, and if one is distracting they can gravitate to one that is more comfortable.

**Q:** The use of the skylight over the interior staircase has been touted as the most dramatic, innovative feature of the building.

**P:** I don't necessarily agree with that, but it



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serves some good aesthetic purposes. If we didn't have a skylight there would be no natural light on that whole line of offices there. It conserves on electricity, and it permits faculty to move into the library. I think it's a great space. It's a lot better to be moving up a stairway like this than it would if it were completely enclosed or just a pedestrian sort of ordinary stairway.

**Q:** How much did the building committee change your original conception of the building?

**P:** Well, a building is what the program is. If you leave something out of the program it's not going to show up in the building. The program presented to us by the building commission was extremely good—perhaps overly ambitious. We were talking about something over 350,000 square feet. The building is now 244,000 square feet, so it's been reduced.

**Q:** So it's a fivefold increase over Fraser Hall?

**P:** This was one of the problems that the school was having in terms of accreditation. The library was spread over a wide number of

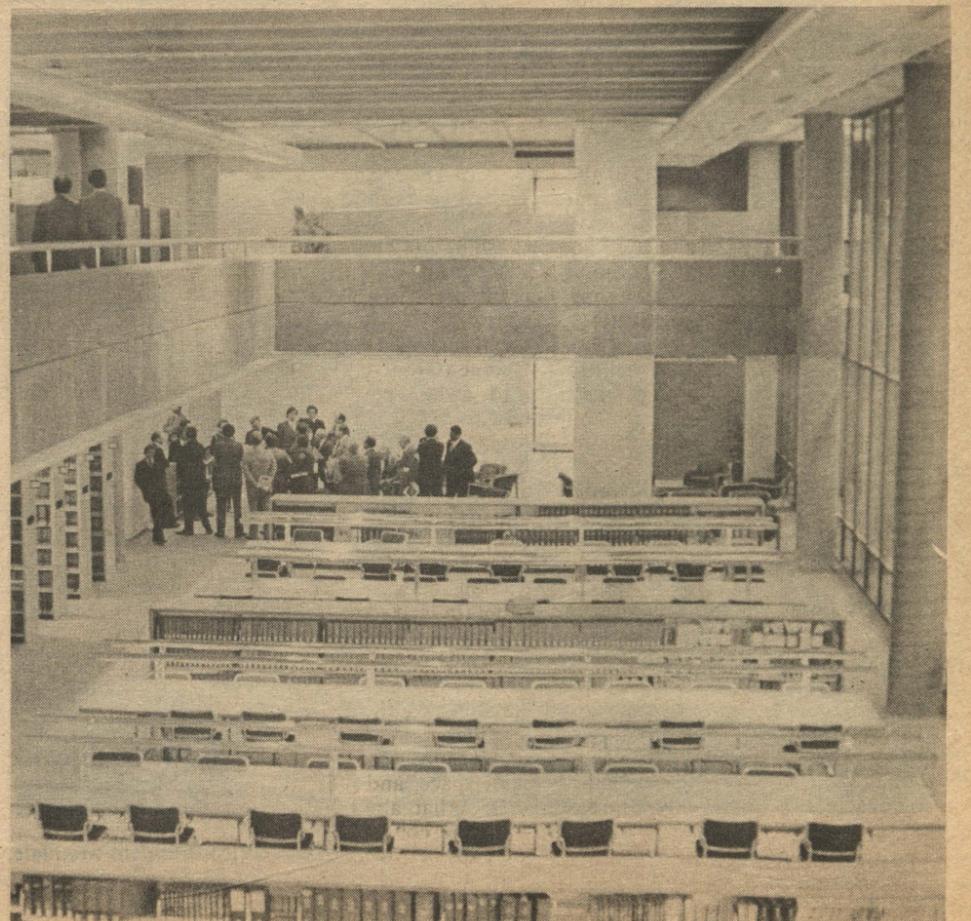
places, classrooms were crowded and inadequate, the faculty was cramped, there were no places for real dialogue to occur. Fraser Hall was designed for a maximum of 350 students, they were accommodating 600, and the enrollment projections were up to 1,000.

**Q:** What sort of site limitations did you have to work with?

**P:** It was very restricted. Being close to Highway 12 posed some problems with noise and visual pollution, but it also had some attributes. I think it's appropriate to have the University's law facility as a gateway to the campus from the west.

**Q:** What about the orientation of the building? You had to work with Willy Hall—there wasn't any opportunity to separate the law school from Willy.

**P:** We could have separated, but we didn't. I'll tell you why we did that. The original program called for a large assembly space for the entire student body of 1,000 people—this represented in excess of a million dollars of construction. The other thing the original program called for was a food service facility



# Here for the dialogue



parts of the building that take a lot of activity and are more robust.

Q: The building seems to have made a commitment to the traditional legal format: Classrooms are of a pedagogical design that Langdell would be proud of, and in that sense . . .

P: Dean Grabb: Langdell Hall (at Harvard) was made like Fraser where the students can't see each other. The U-shaped thing was a deliberate attempt to put students into a dialogue.

Q: It is still dedicated to the Socratic method.

P: This goes back to some profound philosophical issues related to law education. You can learn law in the streets if you have access to a library because law is based on precedent. I think law is basically a conservative activity—you don't go about changing laws unreasonably. You test things, and you try things, and it's a long period of time before a law gets changed.

Q: Something that strikes me about the building is the rectilinear shape—the square building and space with the supports that are not dependent upon the walls—seems to me in the avant-garde of architectural trends. I mentioned the Pompidou Center, and some people have mentioned that it's just a space enclosed and you move things around as you choose. We have at this building—the north face of it looks like it could be an office building.

P: It is. The upper two floors are faculty offices and it should express itself that way.

Q: And the library has a kind of triangular zigzag pattern, which reminds me of Habitat in some respects, and then we have the suite of administrative offices with the terraced rectangular approach. Three very distinct and separate styles in one building. What was the intent there?

P: That was fundamental to our concept. Whenever you begin to design a building, you look for a philosophical base upon which to design it, and generally you find that within the range of activities that will be housed in the structure. Two things generate concept: One is the program, and the second is the site. We came up with three components that we felt were critical to law education: justice, service, and educating the future lawyer. We had a physical expression of these built into our program, which said that there had to be courtrooms, a space for Legal Aid and the Public Defender, who performs services, and for law school administration, which performs a service for the students. So we took those three as distinct building blocks, and tried to give them independent expression in a total framework. So that the triangular configuration you see is the law library, which is expressive of that component . . .

Q: Hasn't this caused some sort of ribbon cutting in the stacks? I think the library staff did a nice job in adapting to that, but I think there have to be some problems with the shape.

P: That happened for two reasons. You see, the auditorium-classroom building is basically triangular, and this begins a geometric pattern. We want these two buildings to conform and identify themselves as one. The triangulation was a response to the site because we wanted to create an open space. Otherwise, we'd be crowding Washington Avenue. It gives you an open space you wouldn't have, it responds sympathetically to the existing building, and it functions as a library. It was a challenge to the library staff to get the books in there, and George (Grossman) was uncomfortable with it for awhile, but I think he's satisfied with it now.

Q: What about the central area?

P: All three of these functions rotate around the student activities zone which contains the general lounge, lockers, food service, and bookstore.

Q: You've already explained why the connection between the plaza level and the subplaza level by the student lounge. Why is the main student lounge set off like a little glass island?

P: It shouldn't have been enclosed by glass, but the fire codes wouldn't permit us to do otherwise. Originally, we had that all open so when you came in it was all part of the same space, and it acts like a peninsula.

Q: What about the use of the railings?—People could fall over the railings—there are gaps between the walls and the railings.

P: Every handrail in this building conforms to fire, light, and safety codes, which

require that handrails be 42 inches from the floor so even a tall person can't tumble over them. Accidents are exceptions to this, but they shouldn't happen. Everything is in conformance to the code, and we'd make you lawyers rich if it wasn't legitimate.

Q: Why are the staircases next to the north main entrance constructed so that if you want to get to the first floor you have to go outside and back in through the main entrance?

P: That staircase will have a door put in on plaza level. We didn't want people to get confused and come back into the building.

Q: The center staircase between 3 and 4 is designed so one can look right into the faculty lounge. Sometimes people don't want to feel that they're discussing right out in the open.

P: Well, there's audio separation, by glass. I suppose it's judgmental. There may be some people on the faculty who feel it shouldn't be. On the other hand, some will feel it's worthwhile because the light can come in and there's an extension of space. It makes you feel better. That's one of the things I hated about the Psychology building. The program dictated that it be a bunch of cells, and there's no opportunity for people to inter-communicate . . . It may cause some inconvenience, but in my judgment, perceiving architecture as being more than a practical solution to environmental problems. It should be an emotional experience, there should be something idealistic about it.

Q: Some people have commented that the building is not very warm itself, particularly on the subplaza level where it's underground. It has a low ceiling, one rather stark long hallway, there's not much space there that would lend itself to artistic display. Is that merely a problem of aesthetics—some people don't like long hallways—or is that a structural problem?

P: It's a big building, and big buildings generally have long corridors, so there's really no way you can eliminate that. But those corridors are not corridors, they're places for communication. And the things that give them life and vitality are color and people. If you have one person standing down there along it might appear to be harsh, but I've been down there when there have been literally hundreds of people talking—there are lots of places to communicate or just horse around.

Q: Why was the design of the little chairs—P: Toadstools.

Q:—chosen over something with a back? After a while, sitting on them is uncomfortable. You can't lean against anything.

G: I can answer that. It was a conscious

choice. They were chosen just as a place for students or a student and a professor to talk after class out of the mainstream of traffic. They're not lounge spaces—you've got lounge spaces up to the ears. Those were intended for short post-class dialogue.

P: Yes, they're for short-term use. If someone wants to sit there for a long time he can, but there are overstuffed chairs in other places for that purpose. I see people stretched out on couches with their shoes on, which brings us to the other point. We didn't want to design anything there which would be destroyed and have to be replaced. The building's only been open a short time, and literally dozens of pieces of furniture have already disappeared. There's evidence of people's lack of respect for property—scratches and gouges. These places we've provided for dialogue we wanted to make as vandal and theft-proof as possible. They're anchored and fixed and hard and they're not there to encourage people to spend long periods of time.

Q: Let's talk about the periodical lounge. It's not unlike a bus stop, a main drag where people walk through and it's not the little sequestered area where you can sit down and read your paper and have the sun shine on you.

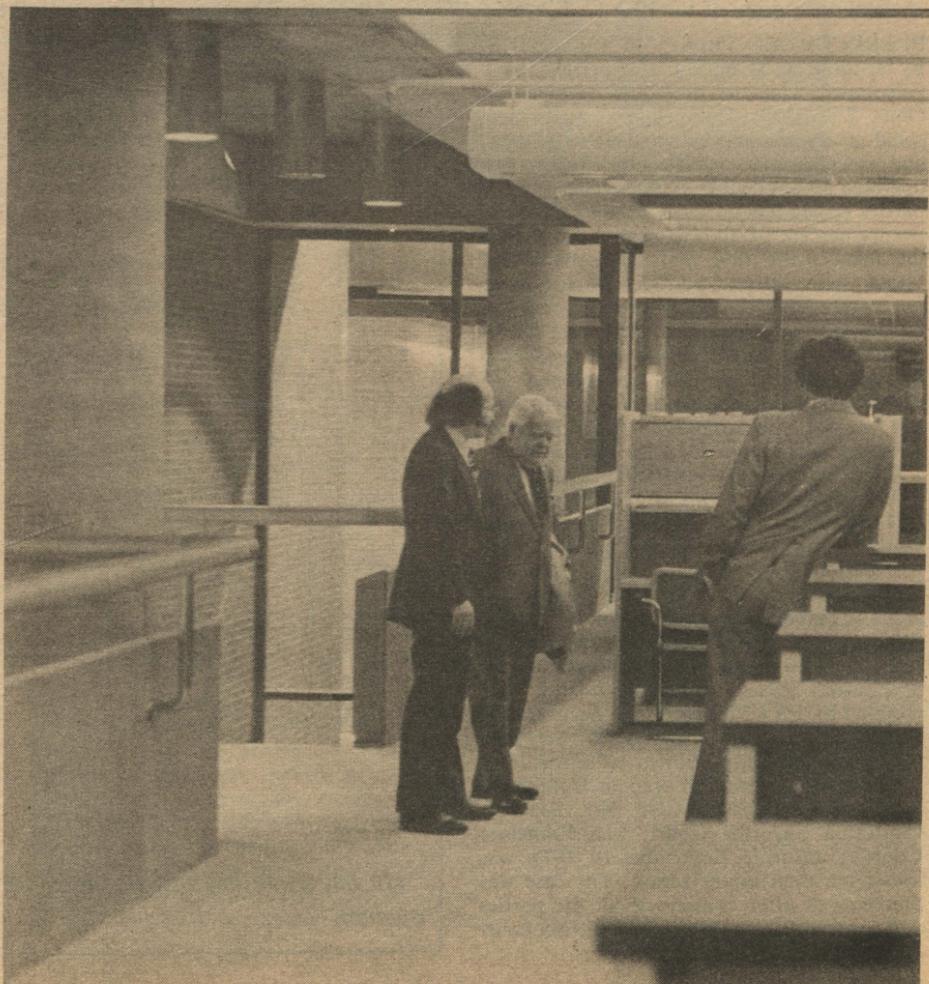
P: I think that's going to change. People are entering the library almost anywhere because the security system isn't set yet.

Q: Well, actually, it's very difficult to enter the reading room from any other place than level 1. But that lounge seems stuck in the middle of a big passageway.

P: Well, we wanted it in a location where it was easily accessible. I don't know how important it is to have quiet. Maybe it is important, but we wanted it visible. But I don't think that it's fair to judge it yet. Not until the building is in operation and everything's in place.

Q: What do you think will be objected to when the building is finished, meaning heating and cooling systems and landscaping will be in.

P: There are some obvious things that will be brought to our attention. There is a whole range of small issues that will be corrected. Some of the punch list items will take as long as a year to correct. I've heard a lot of comments from you today on how students are reacting that I wasn't aware of. Most of those need a period of time to iron out when the building is done. If many of the classrooms seem too hot or too cold, it's because of an imbalance in the heating and cooling systems. But on the whole it is a very good building as time will tell.



to serve 300 which would have been close to another million dollars. By combining the two buildings, we did a number of things. One, we were able to eliminate the duplication of those two functions by connecting the buildings. Now maybe law students don't approve of that, but legislators and University administrators do—they don't want to duplicate services. And it saved an appreciable amount of money. It also permits people to go between the two buildings without having to go outside. This was not done by default—it was a conscious design effort to tie these two buildings together and make them appear as one.

Q: Some people have wondered why the main entrance to the building is on the north side.

P: We have two major entrances. The one that most people will use will probably be that entry because that was the only place we were able to put the parking. We didn't want people to have to move around the building to enter. And there's a second entry on the south side near the bus shelter.

Q: One of the outstanding features of the building is the choice of materials. How and why did you choose them?

P: Well, one of the keystones to good architecture is making a building a good neighbor to what's there. The U of M campus is of limestone and brick, and we were attaching to a building where the material was already selected. We used identical bricks to those in Willey Hall so that you really can't distinguish between the two. We like to limit the palette of materials—it gives continuity and cohesiveness to the exterior.

Q: On the interior, some people have inquired about the exposed concrete, pipes, vents, and ducts. Was that a cost decision, or was it for reasons of Pompidou Center type of appeal?

P: It was a combination. The things that you are referring to are the arteries that are essential in every building. It would have been much simpler for us to have concealed them under a dropped ceiling. There is a cost saving in it—the cost of the ceiling. This was offset somewhat since the workmen had to be more careful about how and where the ducts were placed. Now we did this only in places where ceilings were generally high, or where the use of the space didn't demand too high a degree of finish. This was to save money, and to give a distinguishing characteristic to those