The Dean's Report: Review of the 1978-1980 Biennium

EVOLUTION OF PLANS FOR A NEW BUILDING

In my first biennial dean's report I presented a broad description of the accomplishments and problems in all sectors of the Law School's program. This report will take a different tack and focus primarily on the single development that has overshadowed law school life at Iowa during the last two years: the exciting evolution of plans for a new law building. This narrow focus is justified less by the relatively minor changes that have occurred in law school programs and activities in the past biennium than by the crucial importance to the future of the College of implementing plans for the new building as swiftly as possible.

Background of the Space Problem

It is best to start the new building story from an earlier beginning than 1978. I suspect many Iowa graduates feel some surprise when they hear talk of a new law building; the school is already in a new building, isn't it? This is a reaction with which I empathize, as I remember the newness and spaciousness of the Law Center when I joined the faculty in 1962. A quick check, however, reveals that this is the College's 20th year in the "new" building. The College has conducted business in only three buildings in its 112 years on the Iowa campus. After beginning its academic life in Des Moines in 1865 the Law School moved into Old Capitol in 1868 where it remained for forty-two years. By 1910 the College had outgrown the confines of Old Capitol and moved into the gracious limestone building on North Capitol Street, now called Gilmore Hall. Eventually this home also proved too small, and the College crossed the Iowa River to occupy the present Law Center in 1961. Seen in this historical perspective, the College has a heritage of growth that has required periodic relocation in more spacious quarters.

The current building is a combination of the old and the not-so-old. The office wing is a remodeled dormitory — the Law Commons—which was originally constructed in 1935 to house male law students but served a variety of other residence constituencies over the years. Senior faculty now recall with fondness the porcelain sinks that occupied a corner of most offices for many years—a silent reminder of the rooms' former purpose.

The library-classroom wing of the Law Center was completed in 1961, but not according to the original plans. Due to insufficient funds the building was closed 30 feet short of its designed length (hence the bowling-alley shape of one classroom), and installation of central air conditioning to cool the windowless classrooms was delayed until 1965. But these early problems have had minor impact on our current space crisis.

Planners of the current building could not possibly have foreseen the dramatic changes in educational programs and the escalating rate of library growth that have resulted in using cavernous classrooms for individualized instruction, have forced the offering of faculty and staff in remodeled broom closets, and have required storing nearly one-fourth of the law library's overflowing collection in remote warehouses. I will not recite in full the bill of particulars that led the ABA Accreditation Committee to characterize our physical plant as "abysmally inadequate". It should suffice to say here that inadequate and ill-suited classrooms and offices combine with a severe lack of library space to seriously jeopardize the ability of the College to carry out its ambitious programs.

Today's critical inadequacies in the physical plant did not materialize overnight. In the early 1970's members of the law school community became increasingly aware of congestion in high activity zones in the building. This sense of excessive togetherness was most acute in the law library. In 1974 Dean Blades created a new faculty committee to study the school's space problems—particularly as they related to the library. The Building and Long Range Planning Committee surveyed the present and anticipated space needs of each facet of the law school's program and explored comparable space allocations in a number of other first-rate law schools. The Committee's detailed report was issued in 1976 and concluded that usable space in the law building fell short of meeting the College's present and future needs by over 100,000 net square feet. The Committee recommended further study to evaluate the feasibility of constructing additional space of this magnitude on the present site.
Accrediting Committee Dissatisfied

In 1977, the faculty committee's report was transmitted along with other self-study documents to the Accreditation Inspection Team from the ABA and the Association of American Law Schools. The Inspectors, however, relied primarily on their own examination of the facilities to pronounce Iowa to be the worst-housed law school of its caliber in the country. The following brief passage from the Inspector's Report captures the flavor of their views:

"Though the exterior of the building is reasonably attractive, when one enters the building the lack of any planned relationship between space and function is at once apparent. It is clear that the lack of adequate study space in a proper setting already handicaps and prejudices the quality of the educational experience of the law student. The library is bursting its seams. There simply is no place to put the ongoing flood of new books received in an aggressive and well conceived acquisitions program. There are no offices for additional personnel needed on both the teaching and supporting staffs. Moreover, many of the spaces, particularly the classrooms, are ill-designed for their function. The situation has already reached the emergency stage where continuation of the present state of affairs cannot but threaten the quality of the educational program."

Relying on the Inspectors' Report, in May 1978 the ABA Accreditation Committee found the College's physical plant to be "seriously inadequate." The ABA strongly recommended that the University abandon efforts to expand or rehabilitate the present building and seek instead to provide suitable housing for the law school in a new building.

Preliminary Plans Call For On-Site Expansion

By the time the ABA's evaluation was received, however, the University had already initiated a series of planning studies to consider alternative strategies for meeting the law school's space needs. In the fall of 1976 President Boyd had appointed a special University Task Force on Campus Planning to address the physical planning issues faced by the University in the decade ahead. Examination of the space needs of the law school and the resultant implications for the overall campus plan were included among the central responsibilities of the Task Force.

The University's planning architects, the Hodne-Stoegbier Partners of Minneapolis, were asked to assist the Task Force by investigating the feasibility of an addition to the present law building and evaluating the suitability of alternative campus sites for a new law building. The consulting architects presented their report in June, 1977, concluding 1) that an addition to the present building of up to 150,000 square feet in size was architecturally possible, although it raised sensitive design and environmental problems, and 2) that a number of alternative sites existed on campus that were suitable for the location of a new law building.

Extensive negotiations between the University Task Force and the Law School administration resulted in a substantial reduction of the law school's projected space needs. The space program that emerged called for a law school facility containing 113,000 net square feet, contrasted with the 61,000 net square feet in the present building. Assuming that this need would be met through expansion of the present building (the solution recommended by the Task Force) construction creating 52,000 net square feet of new space would be required.

In furtherance of the Task Force's recommendation, the University engaged the Des Moines consulting firm, Cost, Planning and Management International (CPMI) in the fall of 1978 to study in greater detail the physical and functional feasibility of on-site expansion of the law center. CPMI worked closely with the law faculty and administration in refining the allocations of space within the plans previously developed. Using this data the firm tested various alternatives for enlarging and remodeling the present law center to achieve the needed space.
Two principal design alternatives emerged. The “wrap around” model would have enlarged the building by moving out the south and west walls of the classroom-library wing. In contrast, the “separate building” model would have filled the ravine west of the law center with a new structure to house the law library and remodel the present library-classroom wing to satisfy the school's non-library space needs. The separate building would have been attached to the existing structure through a transportation linkage in as aesthetic a fashion as possible.

**Faculty Opt for New Building**

When the CPMI planners presented their design proposals and cost estimates for on-site expansion in March, 1979 the faculty response was less than enthusiastic. Many faculty members who hoped a workable solution could be found through improvements to the current Law Center saw clearly that the large amount of space needed in relation to the limited size and unusual topography of the present site made such a course of action difficult if not impossible. After extensive discussion the faculty voted unanimously in favor of a new building. In communicating this preference to the University, the law faculty emphasized the critical importance to the future of the College of being housed in a first-rate facility—one that is commensurate in quality with the school's academic programs and that offers a living and working environment that promotes rather than stifles excellence.

Meanwhile, significant progress was being made in moving the law school project forward on the financial front. Throughout the planning process both the University administration and the Board of Regents consistently expressed strong support for according a high priority to whatever capital improvements were ultimately determined necessary to solve the College's space problems. In the University's recent capital planning and budgeting, the Law School has been linked to similar building projects needed by the Speech and Communications Department which currently is housed in Old Armory, a building condemned on safety grounds. For a brief time it was thought that if the Law College moved to a new facility, the current law building could be adapted to meet the needs of these other programs, but this hypothesis proved unworkable and was abandoned in favor of new construction for both law and communications. Following a budget request from the Regents, in May 1979 the Iowa General Assembly appropriated $600,000 to proceed simultaneously with planning for the Law and the Speech and Communications projects.

During the summer of 1979 discussions with campus planners and University officials led to development of a consensus in favor of acting on the Law
College's recommendation of a new building to meet the school's physical needs. Through an extended process of site elimination it was decided that the new law building would be built in the open area between Burlington Street and the south face of the main University Library. Two riverfront sites preferred by the law school, one north of the Memorial Union and the other west of the Main Library, were ruled out by University officials on various grounds. Objections related mainly to fears of overcrowded conditions in the heart of the east campus and the need to preserve options for expansion of programs already located there. The University's decision to construct a new law building on the site immediately south of the Main Library was presented to the Board of Regents at its first meeting in the fall of 1979. The Regents enthusiastically approved the proposal for a new law building, but expressed some misgivings about the site selected. To move the law project along swiftly, expenditure of a substantial portion of the $600,000 planning appropriation was approved and the University was authorized to retain an architect.

Architect Birkerts Selected

A national search was immediately initiated to locate an outstanding architect for the new law building. Applications were solicited from all Iowa-based firms and from out-of-state architects who had recently designed notable law school buildings and other excellent public facilities. Highly competitive submissions were received from a number of firms with impressive credentials, including the designers of new law buildings at the University of Minnesota and Harvard and recent library buildings at Iowa State University and the University of Northern Iowa. After hearing formal presentations from five finalists, the University's Architectural Selection Committee recommended awarding the commission to Gunnar Birkerts and Associates of Birmingham, Michigan. Birkerts is currently supervising construction of an addition to the University of Michigan Law School, a massive underground project which the firm designed. Other impressive Birkerts buildings include the Federal Reserve Bank Building in Minneapolis, the Fisher Administration Building at the University of Detroit, the Dance Instructional Facility at the State University of New York (Purchase campus) and the recently completed IBM Tower in Detroit. While Birkerts' work is quite diverse, it has consistently earned critical praise for its graceful combination of beauty and function. In recent months he has attracted considerable attention in the national news media for the energy saving innovations incorporated in several current projects. Subsequent experience in working with Birkerts and his associates has strongly confirmed the initial impressions of creative genius and consummate professionalism that activated his initial selection by the University.

Soon after Birkerts accepted the commission, the firm was hard at work in Iowa City striving to meet a June 1, 1980 target date for completion of the schematic design phase of the project. The space needs of the College were again examined in minute detail, and a final space budget specifying 117,275 net square feet of assignable space was hammered out in negotiations among the law school, the architect, University space planners and central academic officers. A copy of the final space program is included in Appendix A to this report.

Alternate Site Selected

During interviews of prospective architects, one question that was asked repeatedly by the candidates regarded the finality of the site decision. The size (1.7 acres), configuration, and negative external features of the Burlington Street site caused the architects to express doubts about the site's potential for accepting a distinctive building. This concern surfaced again when the contract to employ Birkerts was submitted to the Board of Regents for approval. In response to the urging of several lawyer members of the Board, the University agreed to reexamine the site question.

The University's campus planning architect was again asked to assess the merits of all prospective sites in consultation with University planning officials and the project architect. In the course of
this review it was determined that the Burlington Street site was not necessarily the best location available for a new law building; three alternative sites were identified that offered better opportunities for building an excellent law facility without compromising the future of other campus programs. The law faculty was invited to express its viewpoint on the site question and voted overwhelmingly to favor any of the three new alternatives over the Burlington Street site.

As a result of this reconsideration a new site was proposed—an elevated plateau west of Riverside Drive and south of Grand Avenue known as Varsity Heights. This 3.5 acre area was acquired by the University in the 1960's to build a dormitory that was never needed. The site bears a strong similarity to the current location of the College, perched as it is on a heavily wooded bluff overlooking the river. Because old houses in Varsity Heights are occupied by student organizations, including cooperative housing units and day care centers, the proposal to build the new law school on the site initially met resistance in campus planning reviews. Eventually, however, relocation arrangements were worked out, and the new site was approved by all agencies on campus and accepted by the Board of Regents at its February, 1980 meeting.

Design of New Building Takes Shape

With the site issue resolved, planning for the new building moved at a dizzying pace during the spring of 1980 as Birkerts and his staff struggled to integrate the College's desires for a highly functional, yet distinctive building with the special features of the site and the architect's professional instincts regarding form and materials. The remarkable circular design concept that emerged is a creative synthesis of these basic elements. In April, 1980, the design was first presented to the law faculty, then campus planning bodies and University officials. All groups made suggestions for improvements in details of the proposal, but the basic design concept received general approbation, and Birkerts' team was authorized to finalize its schematic design using the circular mode.

Just when everything in the planning process seemed to be coming together, outside forces intervened to slow the rush to a crawl. On April 9, 1980 Governor Ray imposed a freeze on all unexpended state appropriations for the 1980 fiscal year which meant that $340,000 of the planning funds had to be returned to the state. As a result of the freeze, Birkerts' firm was directed to cease work at the completion of the schematic design phase of the project; design development and material specification stages would have to be postponed until additional planning funds were available.

Only one exception was made to the general work-stoppage order. Because a prominent feature of Birkerts' design was its extensive use of passive solar energy to heat and perhaps cool the building, the University authorized a special $25,000 planning study to evaluate the practicability and cost effectiveness of the solar energy systems incorporated into the proposal. Subsequent investigations revealed that the overall building design was so energy efficient without the passive solar collection system that it was not economically justifiable to make the major capital investment in the specially designed solar walls. The low cost projected for heating the building meant it would take hundreds of years to
recover the initial $350,000 capital cost of the solar heat collection system, and therefore this feature was deleted from the proposal.

In spite of these setbacks, Birkerts' team worked diligently to meet its schedule for completion of the schematic design. On June 18, 1980, they gave a full presentation of the final design to the Board of Regents, including detailed drawings, photographs of the building model, energy calculations and cost estimates. The proposed structure will contain 181,600 gross square feet of space (compared to 79,000 in the present building) distributed over four and one-half floors, with the most prominent elevation of the building circular in appearance when viewed from the Pentacrest. The Regents expressed strong approval of the basic design and voted to include the new law building among the capital requests to be presented to the 1981 General Assembly. The appropriation to be sought for the building totals $21,235,000. This figure is calculated on the assumption that the midpoint of construction will be March, 1983.

Birkerts explained to the Board of Regents that the circular form was selected for the new law center because "it is the purest of all geometric forms" and implies "the presence of order," a prerequisite to the pursuit of justice. "In spirit, the building wants to relate to and interact with the society around it." The building faces toward a wooded, parklike area to the south of Melrose Avenue. Located along this soft edge are most of the people-oriented components of the College's program—classrooms, courtrooms, offices for faculty and for student curricular activities, an auditorium and a variety of indoor and outdoor conversation areas and meeting spaces. In contrast, the northern half of the circle presents a harder edge to guard against the noise and distraction generated by the heavy traffic flow on the streets to the east and north of the building. Birkerts describes his design's defense against this hostile environment thusly: 'The building pulls up a shield, protecting its contents and also the senses of the scholars. The shield, however, is pierced and provides apertures to give controlled views towards river, city and east side campus.' The Birkerts' team has devoted great care, however, to create a "shield" that expresses an attitude of cooperation instead of aloofness toward the balance of the campus.

Building Design Reflects "Soul" of College

In designing the new building Birkerts and his planning team spent many hours in Iowa City attempting, in the architect's words "to capture the soul of the College." This metaphorical adventure attracted its fair share of good-natured joshing, but all who know the Iowa Law School are aware that there is indeed a special aura that surrounds it. The sources of this aura are several: in part it is the school's unique blending of a long and rich academic tradition with a freshness of outlook and zest for innovation—Iowa is both the oldest law school west of the Mississippi and a recognized pioneer in several of the newest wrinkles in legal education. Equally important are the program emphasis on individual skill and social interaction among its occupants but also allows easy retreat to areas well designed to accommodate
more solitary pursuits such as study and scholarly reflection.

New Building Described

The new law building will present a low profile on the skyline above the Iowa River. This effect is achieved chiefly through sinking the building one and one-half floors into the site and spreading out space on a horizontal plane; the diameter of the building is 300 feet. The danger of sprawl resulting from this huge floor size is dramatically reduced by the use of a large central circulation core that connects all floors in the building and makes main activity areas conveniently accessible. This cylinder, capped with a small dome, is itself a prominent architectural feature of the proposed structure. On the lower floors, plazas, plantings, glass walls and tiered courtyards accentuate the openness of the south face of the building. On upper floors, skylights, internal courtyards and creative use of reflected light make the office and library space much brighter and more airy than the massiveness of the building's north face would seem to dictate. Another special attribute of the building is its thoughtful integration into the natural amenities of the site, preserving many specimen trees, limestone outcroppings and other natural features that make the bluff so attractive.

A vertical cross-section of the proposed building further reveals the sensitivity of the design to the educational goals of the College. On the lowest level is an excavated half-floor designated to house mechanical equipment and low-use library materials suitable for dense storage. Entrance to the building from the north will be gained at this level. On the first full floor, which is at ground level, are extensive library stacks, two fully equipped trial courtrooms and the offices of most of the student co-curricular programs. Classrooms, courtrooms and interview rooms are all connected to a state-of-the-art video recording system.

The second floor is the level at which the circular form is most fully developed. Patrons entering the building through the grand entrance, which faces the open plaza on the south, can walk straight across the circulation core into the law library. The main service area and reading room of the library are at this level. Alternatively, a left turn leads to the major classroom area; a right turn to the administrative offices and the auditorium/appellate courtroom. This latter facility will allow the College to again offer most of its continuing legal education programs in the law school building.

The third floor is devoted almost entirely to library functions with stacks, carrels and reading areas. Specially designed facilities for the Legal Clinic are also located on this level as are several offices for student organizations.
All faculty offices are on the fourth floor along with secretarial offices, a faculty library, a small classroom and a large student lounge. The faculty offices have been ingeniously located to provide each with natural light. In addition, the faculty has direct access to the library floors below. The classroom and student lounge were not accidentally juxtaposed with the predominantly faculty facilities for the top floor; rather the planning was a deliberate ploy to assure easy interaction between faculty and students. This touch is characteristic of Birkerts' total building design. The building does not just fit the site and make a positive statement about the College and its place in the University; more importantly, it actively promotes and strengthens crucial elements of the College's educational program. The building does not just fit the site and make a positive statement about the College and its place in the University; more importantly, it actively promotes and strengthens crucial elements of the College's educational program. The proposed new law building acknowledges traditions of the past, fully accommodates needs of the present, and anticipates changes in the future.

The Next Steps

The only points left to address in this respect are where do we go from here in trying to convert this dream into a reality, and, what can supporters of the Law School do to help. The ball is now ready to be served into the legislature's court. The present condition of the state treasury does not inspire great optimism about obtaining an immediate appropriation of over $21 million; but hopefully, as the economic picture brightens, legislative leaders can be convinced not only of the seriousness of the need, but also of the importance of early funding. If a direct appropriation is not forthcoming, legislative consideration will be invited for the authorization of a major bonding program not solely for the law building but to catch up in long overdue capital improvements at all Regents' institutions.

Once the law school building proposal is squarely before the Iowa Legislature, alumni and friends will play a pivotal role in persuading their local representatives to support the project. To this end, a strong grass-roots effort is contemplated that will utilize as many supporters as can be recruited from among the nearly 3,000 Iowa law graduates who occupy positions of community leadership throughout the state. This report and other similar documents will be assembled to provide background information presenting the compelling case for a new law facility and explaining the details of the proposed project.

Although several new law school buildings in other states have been funded in part by private contributions from alumni and friends, this tactic has not been a part of our funding plan for two reasons. First, the College recently completed a major capital drive for the Second Century Fund, which raised over $1 million; and second, in the course of this drive, Iowa givers made clear their belief that providing the basic bricks and mortar for the law building is a state responsibility. Potential contributors should not despair, however, for once the Legislature has acted there will be ample opportunity to utilize private gifts to provide the extras that will make the difference between an ordinary building and a truly distinctive Law Center of which we can all be justifiably proud.

If everyone pitches in and helps now with political muscle and later with private contributions, by the mid 1980's the Law College will be housed in a building that will rank among the very finest law school facilities in the nation.

Elevation diagrams prepared by the architects show how one and one-half floors of the new structure will be below ground level.
On the first full level of the building, the floor plan provides space for library stacks, two trial courtrooms, and offices for student co-curricular programs.

The grand entrance to the south, the main service area and reading room of the library, the major classroom area, the administrative offices, and the auditorium/appellate courtroom are featured on the second full floor of the building.

On the third full floor, are facilities for the Legal Clinic and library stacks, carrels, and reading areas.

All faculty offices, secretarial offices, the faculty library, a small classroom and a large student lounge are included in the floor plan for the top level of the new building.