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## Above Below

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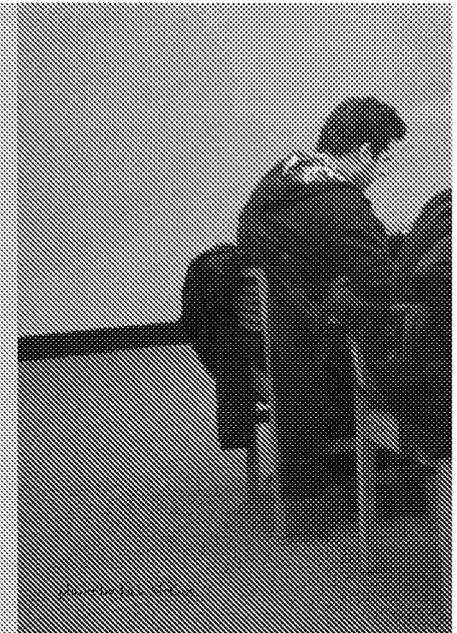
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# Above & Below

New York Law School's unique new space reflects the future of the library

By Camille Broussard



In August 2009, just before the start of fall semester, New York Law School opened the doors to the brand new Mendik Library, a centerpiece of its new building in the heart of lower Manhattan's TriBeCa neighborhood. The glass-enclosed, 235,000-square-foot, nine-level building—five stories above ground and four below—joins with the three connected original buildings to transform the urban campus into an integrated architectural complex. In addition to the library, the new building houses classrooms, an auditorium, event space, and the student center and dining area.

Last summer's move into a new facility was actually the second in three

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years for the Mendik Library. The first was in 2006 when the law school sold the library building to finance an expansion and renovation program. The staff and collection relocated into temporary quarters across the street from the main campus. This move into three non-adjacent floors took more than a year to plan and reduced the linear feet of shelving from 37,000 to 14,500. As a result, books were located on one floor, staff on another, and reading areas and study space on yet another.

Looking back at more than three years of planning for two complete moves, the staff views the adventure in building a new and outstanding library and research facility as an exciting ride filled with both challenges and triumphs.

## More than Just Books

New York City real estate transactions are never easy, and the law school's options for growth were limited. The law school's air rights limited the height of the new building to five floors above ground, meaning four floors would go below ground. To give the library the space it needed in the center of the new student-focused building, logic dictated that three of the four library floors, along with the auditorium, go below ground, creating a well-defined block of space (the "library envelope").

The entrance to the library is on the first floor of the building, adjacent to a popular coffee bar and at the hub of student activity. A large, open reading room, the reference area, and the reserve collection are visible immediately from

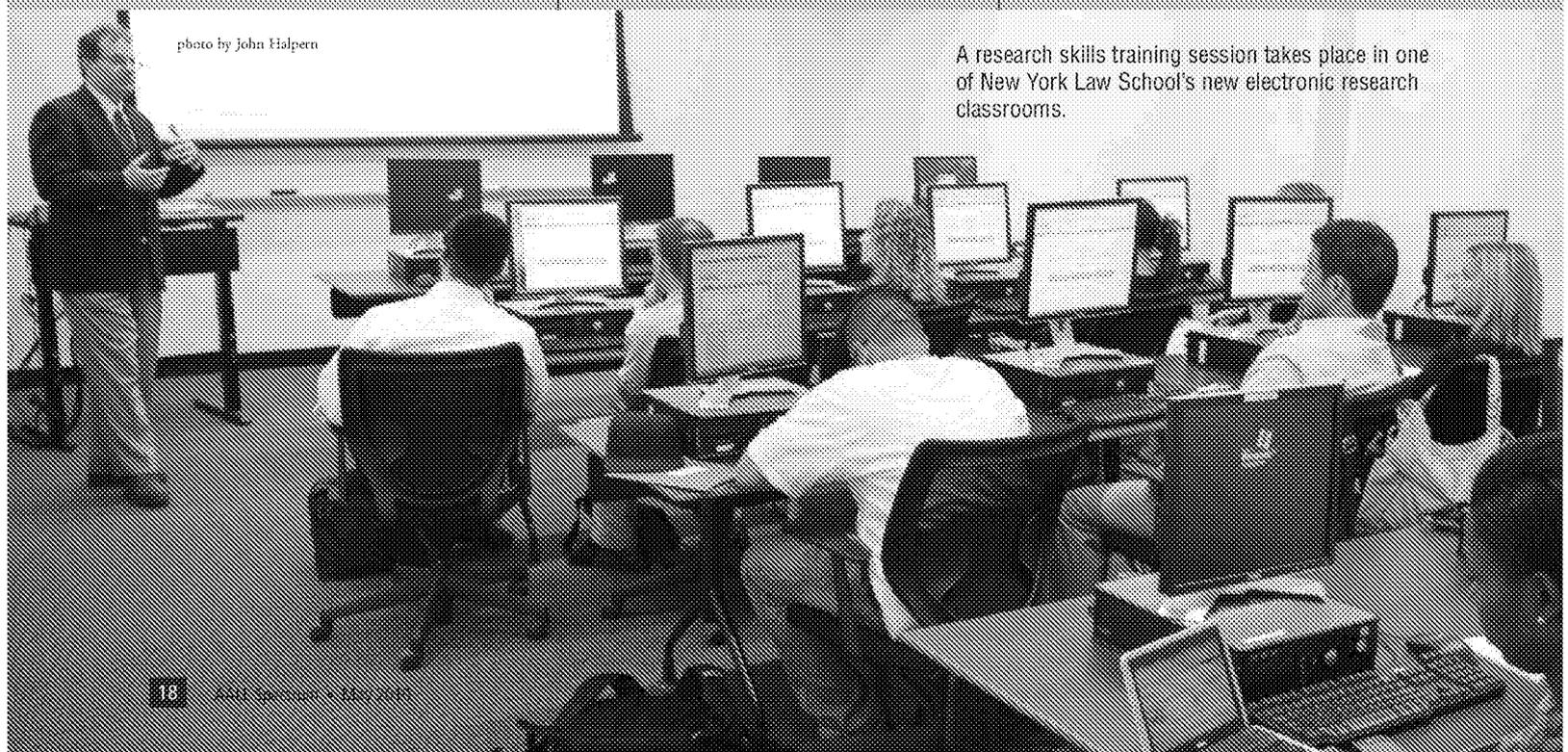
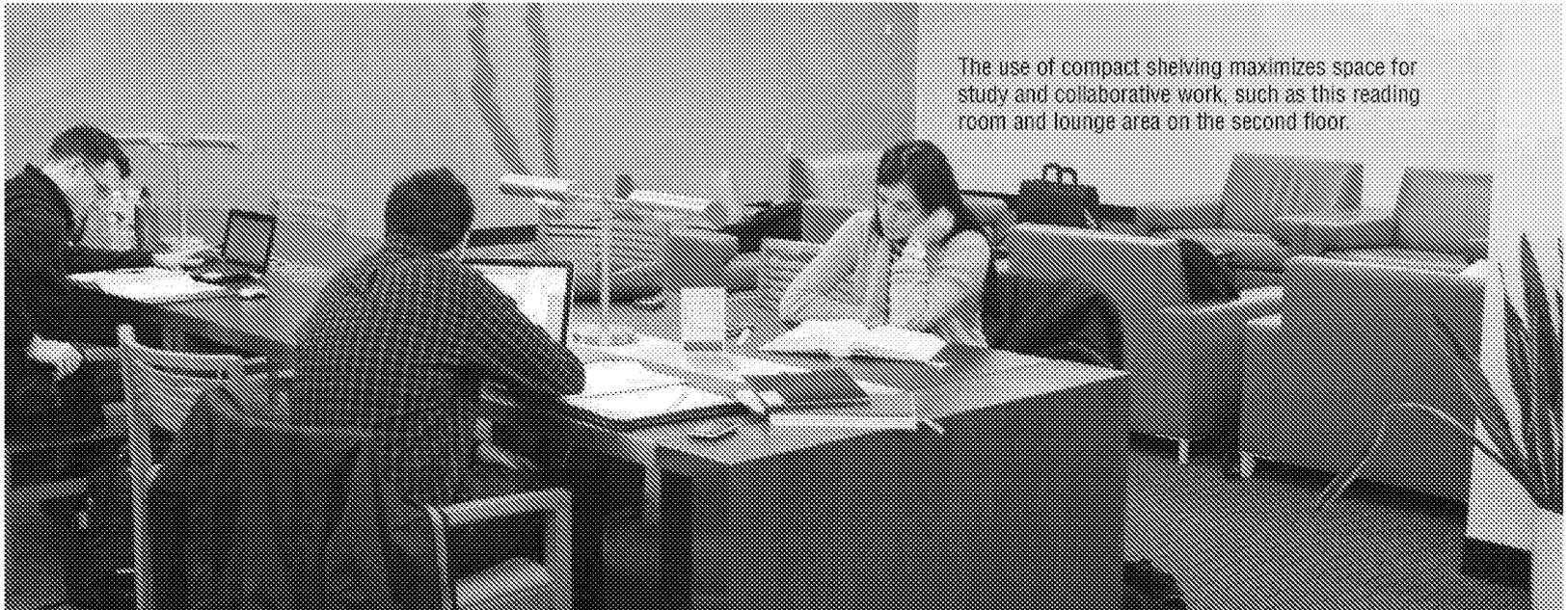


photo by John Halpern

A research skills training session takes place in one of New York Law School's new electronic research classrooms.



The use of compact shelving maximizes space for study and collaborative work, such as this reading room and lounge area on the second floor.

the building's entry foyer. The library space then continues down three levels below the auditorium.

The library staff worked closely with the architects to fit the "library program"—its people, services, and collections—into its envelope. The goal was to create a comfortable, open, well-lit library that would both reflect the current realities of library use and withstand the test of time. The result is a new facility that recognizes that the library is no longer merely a physical space for books and study tables. Spacious carrels, tables, and lounge seating areas with accompanying power and data ports are mixed with open shelving areas. More than 9,000 linear feet of compact shelving maximize available study and collaborative work space, and the law school's wireless

network enables students and visitors to work comfortably with laptops throughout the entire building. While the four electronic research classrooms include hard-wired desktop computers, the furniture set-up is flexible and can be reconfigured. The mobile instructor's station is wired and a Crestron control panel for built-in audio-visual equipment is on the adjacent wall.

#### Practical Considerations

Of course, not all dreams became reality, as budgetary considerations played a role in the planning process. When costs ran high, the planning team adjusted the program and, where necessary, opted for less costly alternatives. The librarians played major roles in ensuring that the "value-engineered" program still worked

from a functional library perspective to fulfill the needs of the New York Law School community. Working closely with the architects, designers, and engineers gave librarians the opportunity to learn a new language and develop skills necessary to communicate library needs effectively.

The new building sits between two major subway corridors and is just a short walk from the Hudson River. In a building with four levels extending approximately 100 feet below ground, these factors required special construction techniques. Surrounding the library's lower floors is an impermeable lining called a "slurry wall," an updated version of an engineering method used in building the original World Trade Center. To allow the protective barrier to be monitored, doors to the slurry wall

*(continued on page 27)*

## Library Design 101

Librarians must play an active role in all areas of building design, from its earliest phases. The design action points below, despite appearing to be simple matters of common sense, can elude even experienced architects, designers, and librarians.

- High ceilings and ample lighting in all areas are critical elements of great spaces.
- Size your study carrels and tables for law students who spread out their texts, notes, and laptops.
- Variable lighting modes for library classrooms will optimize the overhead projector display.
- A displayed overhead projector screen should not completely cover a classroom's whiteboard.
- Door-latching mechanisms can be noisy, particularly in quiet reading areas; test proposed doors before you approve them.
- Check furniture edges to ensure they aren't so sharp as to slice bags, clothes, or students.
- Identify doors that will need to be propped open regularly and make sure that propping mechanisms are built in.
- Electric pencil sharpeners, staplers, and hole-punches don't mix well with quiet study spaces.
- Office and service desks need sufficient grommets positioned above power outlets and data ports.
- Book carts can be noisy when rolling "against the grain" of embossed carpeting; test before you approve.
- Verify that emergency exit doors have alarms and signs to ensure the security of books and valuables.

### Finale: June 2009

Challenges aside, the renovation transformed the entire look and feel of the law library, exemplified by the attractive first floor entrance, circulation desk, and reading sunroom. Alumni, faculty, students, and staff have all commented on the splendid new entrance, and the welcoming new space has afforded opportunities for the law library to get involved in law school events. At graduation last spring, the library hosted its own Champagne and cake reception for the graduating students and their families in the newly

renovated space. In addition, “Wandering Wednesdays” is a new monthly pizza night that allows students and library staff to interact on the first floor. The reading room has also hosted gatherings for the Public Interest Law Scholars, the cooperative learning office, and law school VIPs.

Assistant Dean Hooke Lee captures the true impact of the law library renovation: “We had high hopes for an improved library space, but it has succeeded, both in terms of attractiveness and user convenience, far beyond my imaginings.” ■

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### More Photos on AALLNET

For more before, during, and after shots of Northeastern’s renovation, as well as the planning spreadsheet and a wireframe model, visit [www.aallnet.org/products/pub\\_sp1005.asp](http://www.aallnet.org/products/pub_sp1005.asp).

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are placed around the perimeter of each below-ground floor of the library. Pumps keep the water table at bay, and library users are blissfully unaware that they are in a bathtub.

While planning the new library space, the staff was also carefully considering the physical move of books and equipment for both of the library moves. One aspect of the move process was affectionately dubbed the “Wheat and Chaff Project.” The project required continuous shelf-reading and a systematic review of all subscriptions and acquisitions. The “wheat,” defined somewhat liberally to allow for future reconsideration, would be kept while the “chaff” would be de-accessioned.

During this review, the librarians touched every item in the collection. Faculty members were also invited to participate in reviewing titles in their subject specialties and beyond. Working with a local company specializing in library moving and storage, New York Law School developed a robust off-site storage plan including item-level retrieval for most items published before 1995. Through the review process, many titles were converted from paper to electronic format, anticipating the movement toward a more digital library.

The librarians also reviewed many public services policies with an eye to updating them for the new space. The reserve area of the library was designed so that it could be separately closed and locked, allowing 24-hour access to all other study spaces during reading and exam periods, a policy that students greatly appreciate. Another consideration was how to maintain the beauty of the new library space while balancing patrons’ expectations regarding food and drink. The staff agreed to try a policy allowing light snack foods in the library, as well as beverages in spill-proof commuter mugs.

The Mendik Library shines as a showpiece of the new law school campus. The response from students, alumni, faculty, and visitors has been overwhelmingly positive. Planning for new realities and making the hundreds of short- and long-term decisions necessary in a project of this magnitude was a challenging experience and daunting responsibility. New building projects are also transformative for an institution and that was certainly the case at New York Law School. ■

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### More Photos on AALLNET

For more pictures of the New York Law School renovation, visit [www.aallnet.org/products/pub\\_sp1005.asp](http://www.aallnet.org/products/pub_sp1005.asp).

