

## THE SKYLINE

Assessing the highs and lows of Chicago architecture

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# New luster for a Saarinen gem: Once-threatened U. of C. Law School building is expertly recycled by OWP/P

Sure, Barack Obama taught there from 1992 to 2004. But there's another reason to check out the University of Chicago Law School, especially if you love mid-century modernism.

The school has quietly completed a skillful renovation and expansion of its underrated cluster of buildings, originally designed by the late Eero Saarinen, who shaped such 1960s eye-grabbers as the swooping TWA terminal at New York's Kennedy Airport and the glistening Gateway Arch in St. Louis.

At a time when mid-century modernist buildings are threatened with demolition nationwide, the project is a welcome exception--and an exemplar because recycling the 48-year-old, modern-Gothic law school saved the U. of C. tens of millions of dollars.



Design credit for the \$32 million job goes to Chicago's OWP/P architects, led by president John Syvertsen and design principal Mark Hirons. The firm's work, which began in the mid-1990s, spanned 13 years, four deans and a sea change in architectural perspective, in which such buildings have come to be seen as precious assets, not outdated liabilities.

Completed in 1960 and located at 1111 East 60th St., just south of the Midway that divides the U. of C. campus, the Law School was "contextual" before postmodernists made

that term. The modern building deftly relates to the campus' neo-Gothic architecture without imitating it.

The centerpiece, a six-story, concrete-framed library, has a "pleated" dark-glass exterior that creates a lively silhouette in keeping with the picturesque, neo-Gothic look. But its urban design plan is what really makes the law school fit so neatly into the campus.

Flanking the library are a two-story administrative wing and a bi-level, rectilinear classroom wing ended by a sculptural, six-sided structure that houses an auditorium and moot court. Along with an adjoining 1931 neo-Gothic dorm, the buildings form a serene quadrangle that wraps around a reflecting pool punctuated by Antoine Pevsner's elegantly-fragmented bronze sculpture, "Construction in Space in the 3rd and 4th Dimension."

This ensemble—small in scale, broken into clearly-distinguishable parts, engaging in a dialogue with its surroundings—stands in pointed contrast to the monolithic, black steel-and-glass box of Mies van der Rohe's 1965 School of Social Service Administration at 969 E. 60th St. The SSA building, now being renovated, looks as though it parachuted in from the Mies-designed Chicago Federal Center.

Nevertheless, Saarinen's design had real faults, including 7 foot, 6 inch ceilings in the library tower (fine for book stacks oppressive for people), lack of structural flexibility, and a spartan interior that seemed more suited to moving passengers through an airline terminal than encouraging students and faculty to stop and chat. Such were the shortcomings that, around the turn of the millennium, the school even entertained the idea of constructing a new building directly to the south.

"I would say, 'this is great architecture,'" recalled former dean Douglas Baird, now a professor at the school, "and people would say, 'Are you crazy?'"

A new building ultimately was rejected, according to Saul Levmore, the school's current dean, because it would have cost roughly \$100 million—far more than recycling the original.

Baird presided over OWP/P's first tweaking of the complex, a 1998 addition that extended the rectangular classroom wing to the south and erected a sculptural legal clinic to the east. Self-effacing without being slavish, the classroom extension and clinic echo the exterior materials (glass and textured limestone). Yet the clinic plays subtly with the geometry of Saarinen's auditorium, inverting its combination of faceted walls atop a curving base.

The architects further demonstrated their independence in their 2004 renovation of the original classroom wing, where they gut-rehabbed rooms to make them accessible and to encourage student-teacher interaction. Curving mahogany desks made the rooms more intimate. Sleek but comfortable Eames chairs replaced frumpy wood furniture.

OWP/P's reorganization of the wing's lower level concourse was particularly inventive. It turned a series of rabbit warrens outside lower-level seminar rooms into an intimate internal street lined with upholstered benches and brightened by natural light pouring down the stairwells (below). Even the lockers look good—no institutional metal doors here.

In the newly-completed revamp of Saarinen's once-cluttered library tower, students can study in style, cracking their Constitutional Law texts in bright-orange, Saarinen-designed Womb Chairs. The architects have matched such decorative flourishes with smart planning moves, like the expansive corridors that open up the library tower's previously intimidating thicket of stacks. They've also inserted a welcoming, if somewhat clunky, steel, glass, and mahogany staircase into the tower's high-ceilinged, second-floor reading room. The stair, which leads to a new, centralized student services area on three, is a classic "seen and be seen" spot, fulfilling Levmore's desire to make the school the kind of place where people say "good morning" to each other.

"I've told students if you meet here at the law school, you can get married on the stair free of charge," the dean quipped.



Other touches, from new lighting for the waffle-grid concrete ceilings to textured wood that adorns the fronts of the metal stacks, put the law school back in tune with its mid-century design roots or endow it with new warmth that transcends them. Even the library's upper floors feel welcoming despite their low ceiling height.

There's good news outside, too. The building's once-troublesome reflecting pool, which used to be covered with algae or a drained eyesore, has a new granite surface and underground equipment. The new features are expected to make the pool work as effectively and handsomely as the zero-depth pool at the Crown Fountain in Millennium Park. In the cold months, it will serve as an attractive outdoor plaza.

The verdict? A small but significant victory in the battle to preserve the recent past. The job teaches that mid-century modernist gems can be given new life through a combination of enlightened vision and architectural modesty. Big budgets—and big egos--aren't required.