

# PRESERVING MID-20TH-CENTURY MODERNISM

## Saarinen's Law School Wasn't Razed

By JOEL HENNING

Chicago

The University of Chicago Law School is clearly one of the most competitive in the country. But its cluster of buildings designed by the Modernist architect Eero Saarinen and completed in 1960 hadn't kept up with its students' needs.

The complex's centerpiece is a six-story library tower with a pleated glass façade that was designed to shimmer with light from the reflecting pool below. But over time, the pool, envisioned by Saarinen as an exemplary expression of the Modernist aesthetic, had become little more than an algae-covered "mud puddle," as described by one journalist. Inside, for decades, the library was marginally useful for stashing books but its extraordinarily low ceilings induced claustrophobia in all living creatures larger than mice.



The renovation of the University of Chicago Law School's library gave the interior high ceilings and comfortable furniture, among other improvements.

Until recently, students sat in uncomfortable classrooms with terrible acoustics, poorly lit by ugly fluorescents. Walls and ceilings were poured concrete, much of it exposed, rendering utility, lighting and technology upgrades a nightmare. Below were dismal, linoleum-covered floors. Above were cheap acoustical tiles glued on to low ceilings. Some classrooms were in a dank half-basement.

The buildings presented huge accessibility challenges for handicapped people. And students, able-bodied or not, could find virtually no comfortable places to study or converse, no decent lockers in which to stash their gear. In addition to some design faults, the structures had been compromised as the money ran out before completion, not unusual in ambitious architectural projects.

No wonder demolition was at one point considered. And it didn't help the Saarinen complex's chances for survival that when the law school determined to improve its physical plant in the 1990s, mid-century Modernist architecture was largely scorned. True, there was some praise for such Saarinen works as the Gateway Arch in St. Louis and the swooping TWA terminal at New York's Kennedy Airport. But architectural historian Vincent Scully attacked Saarinen as manifesting the decline of Modernism itself. He said that Saarinen's later works, which include the law school, were "cruelly inhuman and trivial, as if they had been designed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff." When Prof. Douglas Baird -- one of the few Saarinen champions involved in the school's modernization program -- reminded his colleagues that, for all its shortcomings, this was still great architecture, he recalls that their response was, "Are you crazy?"

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The U.S. ambassador to Britain has announced that the embassy plans to move from its **Eero Saarinen building in London**, leaving the Modernist masterpiece's future in doubt.

But the high cost of starting from scratch, a renaissance in respect for Modernism (Saarinen's designs are currently on exhibit at Minneapolis's Walker Art Center through Jan. 4, 2009), and serendipity eventually combined to grace the University of Chicago with a result that pleases students, faculty and those who understood what Saarinen had imagined in the late 1950s, even if he couldn't turn that vision into a reality.

A new building was rejected because it would have cost about \$100 million, roughly three times the \$35 million needed to renovate and add to the Saarinen structures. Serendipity arose with the appearance of a local architectural firm with a dogged determination to bring Saarinen's buildings to modern standards, complement his structures with needed additions, and reconcile the architecture with the needs of the faculty and students.

President John Syvertsen and design principal Mark Hirons of Chicago's OWP/P have been involved in this undertaking since their first interviews in 1993 for a new legal-aid clinic and classrooms, to be built adjacent to the original structures. They were hired when they said that their goal would be equivalent "to adding a line to Saarinen's poem." Saarinen died in 1961, at age 51. Had he still been around, said Messrs. Syvertsen and Hirons, he might have composed another poem entirely, but they didn't feel they could do that. Their mission would be to preserve the integrity of the original, and -- through 15 years and six phases of the project touching every square inch of the law school -- they have.



The University of Chicago Law School

The new legal clinic and classroom wings to the east and south echo Saarinen's faceted glass and textured limestone exteriors, but are soft, light and warm spaces. The classrooms offer a sense of engagement between faculty and students, with curving rows of mahogany student desks and comfortable Eames chairs. The additions pay homage to Saarinen's elegant library tower, but add graceful curves to the faceted walls. The whole now forms a quadrangle that gives the complex a coherence

that was missing before. The original classroom wing's lower-level concourse, previously like a set for "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," has been transformed into a bustling area of student activity

with inviting places to relax, elegant wooden lockers and a wall of glass that offers southern light and greenery.

In their renovations of the original buildings, the OWP/P team raised ceilings and allowed natural daylight into many classrooms, conference areas and lounges. They figured out how to cable the building for high tech, utilities and electricity. The depressing ceiling tiles and fluorescent lights were replaced with acoustical wood housing improved lighting. They reconfigured the auditorium so that it can double as a large classroom, among other things allowing handicapped accessibility and equipping virtually every comfortable seat with connections for computers. Students now have an attractive, light-filled lounge on the library's first floor.



Interior of the Law Library

Perhaps the team's most important achievement is what they did with the stifling interior of the library. When they began this, the final phase of their work, the ceilings were a cramped 7 foot 6 inches. Bookshelves cut off light to the interior, and the furniture was cheap, clunky and uncomfortable. Now, with many of the books moved to a new building elsewhere on campus, the library offers wide aisles, study areas among the stacks, and a steel, glass and mahogany staircase that leads into the new second-floor reading room in which they've raised the ceiling. New lighting and textured wood now warm the library.

The new stairway also leads to an array of offices offering in one place, for the first time, student services of various kinds. Even the cramped upper floors invite browsing and studying, with Saarinen's comfortable Tulip and Womb chairs and Pedestal tables scattered about.

Outside, the neglected reflecting pool has been given a new granite surface and underground plumbing by local architects NagleHartray that make it work like the zero-depth pool of sculptor Jaime Plensa's Crown Fountain, the smash hit of Millennium Park.

"The practice of architecture," said Saarinen, "has to be measured in elephant time." The same could be said about the resurrection of his reputation and this important example of his work.

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*Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page D9*