

# AT THE HEART OF A LAW SCHOOL

*University of Colorado's Law School embraces the library as the core of student life*

by Cynthia Kemper

Main library stair connecting three levels of the new University of Colorado Wise Law Library in Boulder designed by Davis Partnership Architects and Centerbrook Architects.

**T**ucked inside the stunning new Wolf Law Building—a warm and inviting beacon for the multi-cultural mix of international law students enrolled at the University of Colorado’s Boulder Campus—sits the heart of law student life, a 60,000-square-foot, three-story law library and intellectual gathering space.

Designed by Denver-based Davis Partnership Architects and Centerbrook Architects of Centerbrook, Connecticut, the university’s 183,000-square-foot, \$38 million Wolf Law Building and Wise Law Library faced myriad constraints, ultimately achieving a singular integrated solution that continues to draw national acclaim. Catalyzed by the passion of university law students and faculty, and made real by a flexible, dedicated design and construction team, this challenging project resulted in a functional, comfortable learning environment that reflects a campus and student body shaped by high hopes and bold dreams.

“We all wanted the law library to feel like an integral part of the law school, but with only one door,” says Jim Childress, design principal at Centerbrook Architects. “So, the library was spread out over three floors at the core of the building, yet is part of the larger structure.”

Davis Partnership Project Architect Curtis Cox adds, “Barbara Bindliff [Wise Law Library director and Nicholas Rosenbaum Professor of Law] intentionally positioned the Rocky Mountain Region’s largest legal reference collection and library at the ‘heart of student life’ at Wolf Law School. The law library is so fundamental to an attorney’s education that we wanted to communicate this spatially as well. So, we located the entrance on the top floor of the three-story library [basement, first, and second levels] where the largest classrooms, student lounge, and cafe are situated.” Cox continues, “This decision catalyzed the largest concentration of student activity in the building, which further emphasizes the library’s importance overall.”

The architects also placed a formal reading lounge and display area just outside the library’s entrance to provide a natural transition from classrooms. A variety of student group study areas, an instructional computer lab, a seminar classroom, and a reception area were also located inside the library itself to enhance overall integration.

Childress adds that the library was never intended to be a stand-alone building or wing. “Big, grand spaces were not in the budget,” he says, “and few people want to sit in those grand spaces anyway.” In fact, funding challenges did present the architects

with an unexpected need to complete the building for much less—the story and its heroic ending have since been elevated to legend around the University’s Boulder Campus.

The Wolf Law Building was a state-funded project, but just as the design phase was nearing its projected spring 2001 completion, funding was suddenly withdrawn due to an economic slowdown. As a result, the project languished for two years. A very real concern that the school’s reputation could become compromised if the new building was not finished caused the University of Colorado law students to contemplate the impact this would have on the value of their degrees. The university’s cramped, outdated law school structure, originally built in 1954, was in fact contributing to a possible loss of accreditation.

So, the university administration and student legislature came together to seek a solution to this discouraging, yet urgent development. After exploring various options, they decided to assess each law student with a “new building fee” and a campus-wide “capital construction fee”—a move that ultimately funded the building’s completion; construction resumed in 2004.

Budget limitations combined with site constraints due to a shortage of land meant the architectural team “had to design a building that was deliberately efficient and comfortable,” notes Childress. Even though the project was enlarged to accommodate another 150 students, increasing capacity to 750, the final figure turned out to be \$214 per square foot—an incredible accomplishment for a heralded law school in the heart of one of the most treasured university campuses in the western United States.

### Colorado Psyche, Western Law Beginnings Define Library Spaces

The library’s landmark conceptual design draws inspiration from Western law’s foundational beginnings. But, the desire to create a comfortable, inviting space that could be adapted to an increasingly technological, environmentally fragile future was equally in the architects’ sights.

“We wanted to communicate the historical context of law in the state of Colorado,” explains Cox, “so we integrated symbolic elements that speak of natural resources, mining, water, timber, mineral rights, and other specialties like Indian and environmental law—all critical business sectors that shaped Colorado law practice over the last century or so.”

To achieve this point, as students

traverse the building’s corridors, they encounter materials, shapes, and colors chosen to capture the spirit of the West. Overt distinguishing elements like exposed trusses and wood trim represent the lumber industry, while more subtle elements like cattle shoots, water troughs, and silos elicit memories of the state’s still thriving agriculture and ranching industries. The unique proportions of mining structures, natural canyons, and even simulated railroad tracks speak of other related areas of study woven through the state’s past and present rich and colorful history.

In a nod to the surrounding Rocky Mountains and Colorado’s natural beauty, designers also selected fabrics and carpet that reflect more organic patterns, incorporating natural elements like foliage and leaves. Wall colors and accents were chosen to accomplish the same.

“The colors we chose represent the crisp blue of Colorado skies, burnished rusts of our local Red Rock formations, golden hues of autumn Aspen leaves, and the sandy, sage green and purple tones of our state’s prairie grasses and evergreens,” Cox says. “These colors also capture the vibrant optimism and forward-looking aspects of the Colorado and Western personality and the Wolf Law School students’ amazing sense of optimism and liveliness. This building is the result of their dedication and their collective willingness to fund it,” he adds.

### Comfort, Coziness, and Sustainable Spaces Go Hand in Hand

Sustainability was also a key organizing factor. The student body, as critical contributors to the ultimate funding of the building, mandated that the Wolf Law Building achieve United States Green Building Council Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-Silver certification moving forward. The university facility management team took this mandate to heart, not only achieving the requested LEED status, but elevating it to Gold.

The school’s LEED strategies included the integration of daylight and views through the use of special high-perf, low-E rated glass, the use of skylights, placement of reading desks near windows, and a focus on indoor air quality through the off-gassing of materials, low-volatile organic compounds paints, and solvent-free woods, paint, and adhesives. Use of local materials also contributed greatly to the building’s LEED point system, along with energy-efficient lighting and heating, ventilating, and air conditioning systems, waterless urinals, and careful construction waste

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management and recycling, which diverted more than 500 tons of materials from landfills. The design team also made certain that a recycling program was integrated into the Wise Law Library itself.

But the designers' greatest accomplishment, in their view, was the challenge of converting the huge spaces of a building for 750 students into a law library where students love to learn, study, and just hang out.

“Colorado students want natural light and small comfortable spaces where they can hang out for extended periods of time,”

explains Childress. “So, we created lots of nooks and crannies. We also chose colors that create a sense of comfort and home, as opposed to more institutional hues. We even added a skylight into the lower floor to assure natural daylight there.”

He concludes, “Because law students spend most of their time in the library, they not only need convenient access to the library’s collection and faculty, they need a ‘home away from home.’” ■

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