

MORE THAN A LAW LIBRARY: A CENTER FOR JUSTICE



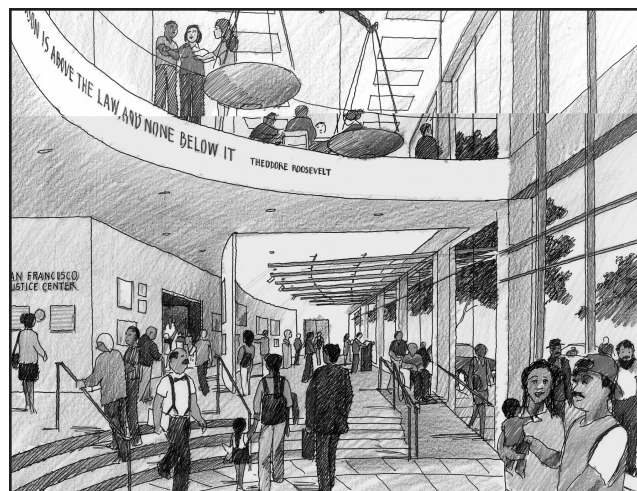
Sketches and digital drawings by Heller Manus Architects

In May 2002, Mayor Willie L. Brown, Jr. attended an historic BASF board meeting at which he announced the appointment of a law library task force. This task force, composed of BASF leaders, city officials, and the San Francisco Law Library Board of Trustees, was charged with identifying and securing permanent quarters for the San Francisco Law Library and to developing an unprecedented “access to justice” center. This article is an update on the task force’s progress.¹

When Bar Association members visit the Civic Center courthouse these days, they are often surprised to find that there is no law library there. The law library, formerly housed on the fourth floor of City Hall along with the courts, was never transferred into the new courthouse. In its place is a small “reference room”, with not much more on its shelves than California codes and reports. Nearly nine years after the courts and the law library were moved out of City Hall for a seismic upgrade, two-thirds of the library’s 250,000-volume Civic Center collection remains stored in an inaccessible, leaking basement on Market Street, while the balance of its working collection and staff are stuffed into the still-temporary space on the fourth floor of the War Memorial Veterans Building.

While it was originally planned that the library would return to City Hall—its home of eighty years—after the retrofit, when the building reopened the library was left in its temporary space, with the understanding that it would be moved into a full library facility within two or three years.

After nearly seven years in the Veterans building, with no access to its stored collection, overcrowded shelves, and extremely poor conditions for patrons



and staff, the law library’s dire plight and urgent need for a remedy were brought to the mayor by BASF leaders Angela Bradstreet, Jeff Bleich, Jon Streeter and Teveia Barnes. The mayor acknowledged the library’s unique value to BASF members, their clients, and the community, and vowed to make the space crisis a priority for the remainder of his term. He also proposed the establishment of a non-partisan task force to identify a facility that would not only house a full-service law library, but would also include a justice center, providing legal resources and services that poor and unrepresented litigants need to actually learn and vindicate their rights.

In May 2002, BASF representatives, the Law Library Board of Trustees, the court, and the mayor’s office convened the Law Library Task Force,² chaired by David M. Heilbron from Bingham McCutcheon.

The task force reviewed eight possible sites in the Civic Center area, and determined that the best location for the proposed Law Library and Justice Center

by MARCIA R. BELL

would be the old state building at 525 Golden Gate Avenue, directly behind the new courthouse. The building was vacated after the Loma Prieta earthquake rendered it unsafe, with no plans for re-occupancy until the city purchased it from the state a few years ago for two dollars. The city originally intended to tear the building down and replace it with a taller office structure, but that concept proved to be economically unfeasible.

However, a task force-commissioned study concluded that the building could be rehabilitated cost-efficiently to fulfill both the law library and the justice center's space needs. After standing abandoned and derelict for thirteen years, the building's rehabilitation for the law library project would not only enhance the vibrancy of the new Civic Center, but it would place the library close to the courts—a matter of keen importance to BASF members, courthouse visitors, and the judiciary—as well as fulfill a San Francisco Charter requirement.³

Over the past year, the task force developed and refined the project concept. The rehabilitated structure will provide a justice center on the first floor, with access from Polk Street for the convenience of courthouse visitors; four floors for the law library; and three floors for city offices or other public uses. The building will undergo seismic retrofitting and be re-clad with an entirely updated exterior. The library's full collection will be restored in the new space, complete with adequate shelving for collection growth and essential archiving, comfortable spaces for patrons and staff to study and work, public access workstations, and classrooms for legal tutorials and electronic resource instruction.

A particularly exciting aspect of the project concept is its unique "access to justice" component, which the task force believes has not been undertaken anywhere else in the country. The San Francisco Law Library and Justice Center will bring together all of the legal resources that indigent and self-represented San Franciscans need. Visitors will be provided access to the full panoply of legal information resources, including legal intake and self-help services, research training sessions, translation services, videotape tutorials, alternative dispute resolution facilities, document copying and binding, and one-on-one counseling by Bay Area legal services professionals—all under one roof. Attorneys, particularly solo and small-practitioners, will appreciate the planned workspace for videoconferencing, depositions, CLE pro-

grams, and other support services. The Superior Court Access Center, currently located in the courthouse, will also move to the Justice Center.

Under the direction of task force member architect Jeffrey Heller, concept designs and renderings were developed to illustrate the project vision and apply for permit and environmental approvals, which are now nearly complete. The 525 Project, as it has come to be called, has the mayor's approval, and the enthusiastic support of Board of Supervisors President Matt Gonzalez and the courts.

When the American Bar Association convened in San Francisco in August 2003, the 525 Project was introduced to the public at a City Hall reception sponsored by the task force, the Bar Association of San Francisco, the San Francisco Law Library, the mayor, and Supervisor Gonzalez. BASF President Jeffrey Bleich presided and welcomed guest of honor, United States Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy, who spoke about the importance of access to justice and shared his recollections of using the San Francisco Law Library early in his career.

With the project concept developed, the permit process nearly complete, and the enthusiasm of the community engaged, the political support of the Board of Supervisors and the new mayor are essential to carry the project forward to fruition. The most daunting challenge yet to be overcome is financing: estimated project costs are about \$45 million, exclusive of financing costs. While some funding sources are available, private, as well as public, funding sources must be committed to this project to bring full legal resources and access back to San Francisco. At a time when the economy is weak, this is a difficult task. However, the commitment is unwavering, and with the support of the San Francisco legal community, it can and will be done.

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NOTES:

- 1 See "The Future of the San Francisco Law Library," Marcia R. Bell, *San Francisco Attorney*, June/July 2002, p. 69.
- 2 Angela M. Bradstreet, Jeffrey L. Bleich, Jon B. Streeter, Allan N. Littman, David M. Heilbron, the Hon. James J. McBride, Marcia R. Bell, Yomi Agunbiade, Marc McDonald and Jeffrey Heller, joined by Law Library President Kurt W. Melchior and (former) BASF Executive Director Teveia Barnes.
- 3 See *San Francisco Charter*, section 8.103. 1995 revision.