

New York Law School



The school's transparent curtain wall symbolizes institutional transparency while reminding law students they are part of the city.

A new school in Tribeca expresses a unique institutional identity while raising the bar for student-oriented design.

NEW YORK LAW SCHOOL'S NEW ACADEMIC building for a generic modernist box, one of the city's myriad mid-height Miesian structures that economize on materials, workmanship, and often visual interest. On detailed inspection, however, more is going on in this building than first meets the eye. Inside and out, the new NYLS building takes subtle and dramatic steps forward for both its institution and its city.

"This project is really almost close to 40 years in the making," notes NYLS president and dean Richard Matasar. Under consideration since 1970, it became financially possible through sales of air rights above the building and an adjoining parcel during the real estate boom of the mid-2000s. Groundbreaking took place in August 2006, and the new building opened last September. The program includes all of the school's classrooms, the library, auditorium, cafeteria, conference and event spaces, and several lounge areas, totaling 213,000 square feet and nearly doubling the school's size. In keeping with the school's priorities, the building is completely student-centered, with faculty and administrative offices remaining in the connected three-building complex on Worth Street (renovation of which, the second phase of the campus overhaul, will be complete by spring 2010).

The school's institutional identity stresses community involvement, and the new building consequently emphasizes transparency with a glass and aluminum curtain wall, revealing its internal activities to the neighborhood and giving students a constant reminder of where they are geographically, socially, and professionally. "Theoretically, we could just put the big box out at the end, put a couple of windows in, and the project would be done," says Matasar, "but that would not have met our subsidiary goal of talking about the transparency of our operation... letting people understand that we are a part of Tribeca."

Behind the clear curtain wall along Leonard Street is a panel of dignified cherry interior walls, forming what Matasar calls "the box within the box"; this structure creates a series of brightly lit lounges that reserve the building's prime real estate for students' use. Interior curtain-wall segments to the north present a representational frit pattern, a pixelated image of book spines from the NYLS library. Visible both from the exterior and from inside a prominent glass-enclosed staircase on the northern perimeter, the panels are fritted Viracon silkscreened monolithic glass, with high opacity white V175-custom screens provided to the company so it could create templates for various glass sizes. Turn the corner south onto West Broadway, and another fritted curtain wall encompassing the second through fourth floors forms a west-facing bookend alongside panels of stone and walls clad in Centria aluminum panels with a two-coat fluoropolymer finish containing mica flakes. Simple orthogonal volumes with ample glass and daylight create an overall atmosphere that's atypical for academic buildings: "extroverted," the



Above Students sit in a northwest corner lounge area. Most of the curtain wall's horizontal supports occur at floor level, emphasizing the feeling of openness.

Below, left Steel framing allowed the 50-foot spans necessary for Socratic-style classrooms and auditoriums. **Below, center** The curtain wall appears to float above the school's first floor. **Below, right** On the fifth floor, the curtain wall wraps around to form one side of an outdoor terrace.



Previous spread, this page top and facing: Jeff Goldberg/Esto; left, courtesy SmithGroup

Right The inner glass wall of the staircase maintains the view into the building.

dean and architects agree, rather than cloistered, even though four of the building's nine stories are underground.

The curtain walls, says David O'Neil, of the project's associate firm BKSK Architects, used a standard Alumicor BF-2000 unitized system with customized exterior 6-inch-deep caps (except for a cantilevered piece at the bottom of the Leonard Street wall) and metal infill panels at spandrels to allow the depth of the structure to be visible through curtain wall. That north wall at the monumental staircase presented "an atypical condition," he says, with no floor slab up against the window to support anchors; instead, rods hanging from the fifth-floor support tubes for the fourth floor, and so on. To prevent the spread of fire, the stair opening is enclosed in this area, and additional sprinkler coverage is placed at the glazed openings into stair.

Both clear and fritted segments are Viracon low-emissivity glass; the book-image fritting also assists in thermal control under direct afternoon sunlight, particularly on the west face. According to Greg Tedesco of curtain-wall erector Genetech Systems, unusually large 17-foot floor-to-floor dimensions and the architects' desire to avoid spandrel glass on the curtain walls added up to an exceptionally open appearance, outside and in. "The horizontal support member is pretty close to the floor line," he notes, creating a "floor-to-ceiling glass look; then the anchors themselves are custom, mounted at the face of the slabs, so you didn't read them up above the slabs.... When you stand in the building, there's no obstruction at all, other than the structural columns."

On the second story and above, large classroom and auditorium spaces require column-free spans of over 50 feet, with raised platforms for visibility. "Steel was the right choice for the structural system," Dahlkemper says, both for flexibility and for performance relative to weight. Classrooms are built on isolation slabs, improving acoustic integrity: Despite the nearby subway lines and rumbling trucks, every academic space is capable of studio-quality audiovisual production. Brightly day-lit corridor lounges function as additional rooms for collaborative small-group work as well as social space; the fifth-floor setback combines the cafeteria with a terrace.

From a northwest exterior view, the NYLS building reads as five complementary boxes (the two fritted "wings," the clear north curtain wall, the stone-faced southwest volume, and a mesh-enclosed upper mechanical space) containing the inner cherry-paneled core—the high-tech future protecting the foundations and precedents of legal history, the deep vertical mullions echoing the lines of the district's many cast-iron buildings from the previous century. From inside, the building creates a crisp and optimistic atmosphere for scholarly work. There are no artificial borders between the law and society at large, this building tells its students; the ideas that command their attention during their years here are not the property of a privileged guild but a set of lucid principles reflecting the real world without distortion. ■



NEW YORK LAW SCHOOL

Location: 185 West Broadway, New York, NY
 Owner: New York Law School, New York, NY
 Developer: Studley, Inc., New York, NY
 Architect: SmithGroup, Washington, DC
 Associate Architect: BKSK Architects, New York, NY
 Structural Engineer: Thornton Tomasetti, New York, NY
 Mechanical Engineer: Jaros Baum & Bolles, New York, NY
 Construction Manager: Pavarini McGovern, LLC, New York, NY
 Structural Steel Erector: J.C. Steel Corp., Bohemia, NY
 Miscellaneous Iron Erector: FMB, Inc., Harrison, NJ
 Architectural and Ornamental Metal Fabricator and Erector: A-Vaj Architectural Metal Corp., Mount Vernon, NY
 Curtain Wall Erector: Genetech Building Systems, Inc., Staten Island, NY