The Best of Times, the Leakiest of Times:

Memories of the late, unmourned Seeley G. Mudd Hall endure for the Washington University School of Law faculty and students who occupied it.
PLASTIC SHEETING suspended overhead to catch leaking brown water … “neo-Brutalist” raw concrete walls throughout, pockmarked with rebar holes where “gremlins” left cigarette butts and gum wrappers … classrooms where students and faculty couldn’t hear one another.

Today, ensconced in the supremely functional Anheuser-Busch Hall, faculty look back with bemusement on the Mudd years. Alumni enjoy recalling Mudd’s horrors. No one, it seems, regrets its demise in summer 1998; some alumni actually took champagne there on demolition day to toast the wrecking ball.

Mudd didn’t start out this way. When the law school moved into Mudd from January Hall in 1971, the faculty were enthusiastic. No less a personage than retired Chief Justice Earl Warren spoke at the dedication. January Hall, part of the university’s historic Cope and Stewardson campus core, had cramped the law school. “We were all excited about having this new, larger space, and air conditioning,” recalls Michael Greenfield, the George Alexander Madill Professor of Contracts & Commercial Law. “It didn’t take us long to realize that all our excitement was misplaced.”

Even as the school was relocating, the awful truth began to dawn. “When we moved to Mudd,” recalls Gary Feder, AB ’70, JD ’74, LLM ’80, “we thought the space was fine because we believed it was the garage for the new building. Unfortunately we then learned that this was the new building.”

Mark G. Arnold, JD ’77, notes his late law partner, Fred Eppenberger, was chair of the fundraising committee. “At the dedication, he inquired, ‘When will it be done?’ Advised that it was finished, he reportedly responded, ‘My God, what have we done?’”

Mudd quickly revealed itself to be ill-designed. Dorsey D. Ellis, Jr. knew when he arrived as the school’s new dean in 1987 that replacing it would be a major part of his work. “The building was designed to satisfy the aesthetics of the architect, not to serve the functions of a law school,” says Ellis, now dean emeritus and the William R. Orthwein Distinguished Professor of Law Emeritus.

Take the classrooms. “The three large classrooms the architects designed were awful,” Greenfield says. “They were built more like operating room amphitheaters, with a very severe rise, not well designed for students to communicate with each other.”

Ellis agrees: “The students in the back rows were so far away from the professor that it was hard to interact with them. When you had a discussion with the students down front, the ones in back couldn’t hear. There’s a lot of discussion in legal education, and people have to be able to hear each other.” The raw concrete walls produced very poor acoustics, compounding the problem.

Built on nine levels, each separated by a few steps, the building had only one elevator—and it served only five of the levels. Alan Frost, JD ’73, broke his ankle playing hockey with his classmates. “Navigating on crutches was a serious challenge,” he recalls. “Every classroom required me to descend and ascend lots of steps.”

Claire Halpern, JD ’75, recalls that there was only one bathroom—with two stalls—for women, creating a dilemma for students who had two or three back-to-back classes.

The building leaked almost from the beginning. “There were leaks everywhere,” Greenfield says.
“There were leaks in the library; we had plastic sheets draped over the shelving to keep water off the books. So if you wanted a book in that area you had to climb under the plastic sheeting. Buckets were placed strategically to collect the leaks, and students studied to the annoying sound of the drips hitting the buckets.”

A new classroom added in a 1975 expansion also leaked; plastic sheeting was the remedy there too, Greenfield recalls, “so awful-looking brown water accumulated in this sheet sagging over the students.” The faculty offices leaked as well, and Professor Neil Bernstein wore galoshes to work because his office carpet was so drenched.

The heating and air conditioning system never worked properly. John E. Petite, JD ’93, remembers his “feet sweating in lecture halls when the concrete floor would for some reason heat up to 85 or 90 degrees.” And during winter, Paul DeMuro, JD ’79, wore a down parka in the library—he remembers the difficulty of turning the pages of his hornbook while wearing gloves.

“We had either heat or air conditioning; we couldn’t switch back and forth,” Greenfield says.

In fairness to the architects, Greenfield notes that a construction decision, apparently driven by budget constraints, might have caused that limitation.

The design ignored between-class traffic. All the students entering and leaving the classrooms had to pass through a narrow archway, Ellis says, producing “enormous congestion.”

The architects designed a courtyard between Mudd and its sister structure Eliot Hall, intending to echo the courtyards of the Cope and Stewardson plan for the rest of campus and to provide an outdoor classroom in pleasant weather. But like the structures themselves, this treeless space and its built-in seating were concrete and absorbed so much heat that it was hot and unpleasant in much of the spring and fall, to say nothing of St. Louis’ stifling summers.

Faculty offices and the library reading room had natural light, but all other spaces in the bunker-like

MUDD HALL’S ‘Winning’ Design

MUDD HALL’S DESIGN was the unanimously selected winning entry in a 1965–66 architectural competition that drew more than 150 submissions. It garnered several awards and national recognition in professional journals.

In the courtyard and the peaked roofline, the architects sought to echo elements of the campus’s historic buildings while using a new idiom for a new age. They also hoped to create a homelike atmosphere, with no corridors and “The Pit” student commons resembling a living room.

George Anselevicius, School of Architecture dean and one of Mudd’s designers, said the building returned “to the human scale of the campus through height, shape, and arrangement of building elements.” He told Student Life that Mudd Hall was “a contemporary solution ... within the spirit of the university campus.”

And, Anselevicius added, perhaps more presciently than he knew, “All important pieces of work draw controversy.”

Much less prophetically, the Student Life writer opined: “The building is obviously here to stay.”

Mudd Hall’s design featured both a concrete exterior and concrete courtyard.
Ellis says. “They were really committed to teaching.

“The building is just the carapace,” Ellis continues. “The law school is what’s inside.” And the law school has long enjoyed wide respect. In addition to its dedication to teaching, Ellis notes a commitment to scholarship, “to advancing knowledge about the law and improving the law.”

The school was also willing to experiment and innovate. The school boasted, for example, two internationally known Chinese law experts, Gray Dorsey and Bill Jones, the latter “probably the No. 1 scholar in Chinese law in the United States in the 1970s and early ’80s,” Ellis observes.

A national guide to law schools described it as “Kafka-esque,” according to Steve Schneider, JD ’94. Alumna Halpern adds, “It’s not without reason that the student lounge was called ‘The Pit.’”

Understandably, Mudd was an obstacle to recruitment of both students and faculty. Very few of the top graduates from the undergraduate program chose to apply. As to faculty prospects, “We didn’t go out of our way to show them the classrooms,” Greenfield says with a chuckle. While no prospective hires ever said that they declined an offer because of the building, Ellis observes that faculty look at many factors in deciding on positions.

In spite of the building, the school prospered during Mudd’s 25-plus years. “The faculty more than doubled,” Greenfield observes, from about 18 in 1971 to more than 40 in 1997. In speaking with prospective hires, Greenfield says, “we emphasized the support for research and writing, the collegiality, the helpfulness of faculty here to junior colleagues.”

The student body grew, though slowly at first in those Vietnam War years. The same national publication that described the building as Kafka-esque nevertheless praised the school. Alumnus Schneider concluded that “if the school could have a good reputation notwithstanding the leaky, ugly structure, it must really be an awesome school.”

An exceptional faculty propelled the law school upward. “We had a terrific faculty, which predated my coming,” Ellis says. “They were really committed to teaching.

Despite the acoustical challenges of the classrooms, “the people” made the Mudd Hall years worthwhile.

He adds: “That was unique, to have that kind of international perspective at that time.” The law school also took an unusual approach to clinical education, using tenured faculty rather than visiting lawyers to teach and creating one of the nation’s top-ranked clinical programs.

No matter their grim recollections of the building, many alumni are grateful for the quality of their education. Says Robert Newman, JD ’75: “The faculty,
The administration, and the students all worked very hard to make the best of it, and we earned a very good education.

The people, alumnus Petite agrees, transformed the building. “I walked out of that building after three years with a sharper mind than the one I walked in with, courtesy of some of my favorite teachers and some great classmates and friends. It was the people that made Mudd great and turned a gray and dreary place into a warm and wonderful one.”

Fiona Joseph, JD ’97, agrees: “Washington University School of Law was a wonderful experience. Everybody says so. During the years I spent at the university I met friends of the highest caliber. We created bonds that lasted for years after graduation.”

Joseph also is grateful for the education she received: “Knowledge, credibility, and mission are the gifts I received at Mudd Hall. … I will always be thankful for my years with the faculty and staff.”

Some alumni even suggest that Mudd’s very failures as a building made them better students and better lawyers. “I wonder,” alumnus DeMuro muses, “if I had spent more time in the Saint Louis University library where it was warm and toasty, whether I would have just nodded off after turning a few pages and thus not performed as well as I did.”

There also seems to have been a solidarity born out of shared misery that produced what DeMuro calls “unifying forces.” Schneider says his class wore the Mudd Hall mantle like “a badge of honor.”

And there’s one final achievement Mudd Hall can claim: “It certainly made it easier,” Greenfield observes with wry humor, “to make a case for a new building.”

The outdoor courtyard was the site of numerous formal and informal student gatherings.

Chris “L.C.” Lozano, JD ’89

“My favorite story was one involving Professor Levin, in the days of chalkboards and chalk. Professor Levin had a habit of pacing back and forth across the stage resting his shoulders against the walls on either side of the lectern. After months of watching this, we arrived early for class one day and put chalk dust all over the concrete walls. The color blended perfectly with the concrete walls. Professor Levin began his pacing and leaning and did not notice that his suit was now covered in white chalk dust until giggles turned to laughter, and finally he noticed. Being the good sport he was, he laughed along with us and continued his lecture.”

memories