



# THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

## EXTREME MAKEOVER: OLD COURT HOUSE BECOMING NEW LAW SCHOOL

Roy Keathley surveyed the old Front Street building at Madison that looked like it might be ready for a wrecking ball.

Wires dangled from the ceilings, steel rods jutted from the walls and chunks of plaster and concrete littered the floor along with the dust. Lots of dust.

All were signs, however, of an old building -- once the home of the U.S. Customs House, Court House and Post Office -- getting a \$42million makeover to become the new, state-of-the-art home of the University of Memphis law school.

“It’ll be the nicest law school building in the country,” said Keathly, whose 50 years of law practice included appearances in the third-floor federal courtroom that still has its “Pepto-Bismol pink” walls. “The size of this building is what’s so astounding. It’s enormous.”

He was one of a dozen lawyers, state officials and law school folks who got a recent tour of the facility that, with its planned glass-enclosed fifth-floor overlooking the Mississippi River, would be a perfect site for a John Grisham movie.

“It’s a great view from up here,” said the law school’s interim dean, Kevin Smith, after the group made its way to the rooftop. “The last time

we were up here nobody wanted to leave.”

But when they do, trying to find their way out of a 140,000-square-foot law school -- more than twice the size of the campus law school -- could be a challenge.

Smith said the goal is for the law school to begin moving to its new home next year during the weeks surrounding Thanksgiving and to begin holding classes in January of 2010.

Finding parking for 415 students and 50 faculty members and staff will be another challenge, but school officials say they hope to negotiate a school rate with owners of several area parking garages.

The Downtown law school will include a five-story library, a 300-seat classroom and auditorium, three high-tech courtrooms for moot court, mock trials and visiting appellate courts, an area for the school’s legal clinic, a student lounge with a coffee shop and study areas, some seismic protection, up to 60 security cameras and a campus police officer.

The school’s proximity to the Downtown courthouses and law firms is expected to be beneficial to both students and lawyers.

Project architect and tour guide Bill

Nixon of Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects, Inc., said the renovation is 35 percent complete, on time and on budget. The project also includes Fleming Associates Architects and general contractor Bell Construction of Brentwood, Tenn.

### No. 1 Front Street: A TIME-LINE

1885: Customs House opens with federal court.

1903: The building is expanded to the west

1929-30: Major expansion to the north and south, including the addition of twin columns, modeled on similar features in the Louvre in Paris.

1960-63: Major restoration. It ceased to be a federal courthouse in 1963.

1972: The city’s main postal operations were transferred to 555 S. Third.

1980: Building placed on the National Register of Historic Places

2007: University of Memphis law school takes possession of building.

2008: Renovation project