The Jenkins Law Library in Philadelphia is America's first law library, but it does not have a permanent home. As a result, the library has moved seven times in its 203-year history. For the past 35 years it has occupied space in office buildings. When the library’s lease recently expired, it offered the opportunity to renovate Jenkins’ library space into a destination.

Two years prior to the expiration of our lease, the library engaged an outside consultant to conduct focus groups among the library’s various users and staff to find out what they liked and disliked about the existing facility and what they would like to see in a newly renovated facility. This proved to be a valuable tool for two reasons: it confirmed ideas that our staff thought would improve the library, and it gave those who participated in the focus groups a sense that they had input into their new library.

We then began working with our architects and designers. They conducted programming exercises with the staff and began the planning. The office leasing market in a large city is competitive, and we engaged a real estate leasing company to investigate prospective spaces. Six spaces indicated an interest, and our current landlord came back with the best offer. The landlord even included a generous renovation allowance to update the library as part of the deal. This was an opportunity for Jenkins to reconfigure its space to accommodate the wishes of the focus groups and what we believe 21st century libraries should be.

The architectural team began incorporating our ideas into a floor plan, and during a period of a few months we created our ideal plan, taking into account our renovation allowance. Initial bids came back from contractors, ranging from $700,000 to $900,000 more than our allowance. We went back to the drawing board, eliminated extras, and went out for a second round of bids that ranged from $180,000 to $450,000 more than the allowance. We felt comfortable selecting the lowest bidder; it was the company that built our space 20 years ago.

Jenkins’ original space aged well. After the renovation was complete, two of the library’s stack areas remained in their original places. The remaining areas were reconfigured to incorporate what we believe our visitors want when they come to Jenkins and what we need to fulfill our mission. They include a large reading room with comfortable furnishings, easily accessible stack areas for a growing collection, and a place to store prior editions of treatises that the practicing bar relies on us to maintain.
One of our requirements was to have a reading room that incorporated a reference desk, computer hexes, an area to begin library tours, and comfortable seating.