CUNY Law is set to move to 2 Court Square in Long Island City in 2012. To engage the CUNY Law community in a dialog about the design and renovation of the six floors it will occupy, Dean Michelle J. Anderson convened an interface committee. Composed of faculty, staff, and students and chaired by Professor Rick Rossein, the committee met on an ongoing basis with the architectural and design team at Kohn Pedersen Fox to discuss everything from classroom size to paint colors. Professor Rossein shares his thoughts on CUNY Law and the community’s involvement in this important moment in the life of the Law School.

What brought you to CUNY Law?

When the Law School enrolled its first class in 1983, I was working in the New York City Office of the Mayor in the area responsible for enforcing the mayor’s executive order concerning equal employment opportunity in city contracting. The late professor Rhonda Copelon, a founding faculty member and friend, invited me to teach one of her civil rights classes about employment discrimination, and, after teaching two classes, I was urged by her to apply for a position. Since I enjoyed the students in her class, was enthusiastic about the mission of the Law School, and had graduated from Antioch Law School, one of the two original clinic-focused law schools, I knew I had found my home at CUNY.

Tell us a little about your scholarship, teaching, and public interest passions.

I have been involved with the struggle for equality and fairness in our society since I was very young, having grown up during the civil rights movement and in a family that was active in pursuing human rights. In law school, I was inspired by a professor in the women’s employment discrimination clinic, and I had the opportunity to work in the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division. Assisting people in gaining dignity and fairness in the workplace (and in other places like schools) through equal opportunities informs my practice, teaching, and scholarship.

What will moving to the new space mean for you and the classes you teach?

Since my teaching is infused with learning doctrine through a lawyering lens, I am thrilled with our move to the wonderful new building at 2 Court Square in Long Island City. For example, I teach a trial practice class in which the students conduct a three-hour mock jury trial. In the new building, we...
will have a moot appellate courtroom and three trial practice rooms, including one with the latest in electronic technology. This will enable us to project exhibits, depositions, and videos, and have multiple fixed cameras simultaneously focused on the student lawyer, the jury, the witness, and the judge, so that the student will later be able to observe and learn from viewing his or her impact on the various participants in a jury trial.

What role did the interface committee play?

The interface committee brought together students, staff, faculty, and administration to coordinate communication and seek broad input and ideas on how to design our space for our unique community and mission. The committee was part of the larger building committee and facilitated many small group meetings and discussions, where we listened to the needs and ideas of faculty, staff, and student groups.

What are some of the design elements that will have the greatest impact on the new space?

Upon entering our new building, one will be greeted by a visitors’ center, a child-care center, a three-story bold atrium, large classrooms, and a moot courtroom. On the second floor, there will be a welcoming area and a new, state-of-the-art auditorium. The third and fourth floors consist of classrooms and study space. The fifth floor, which is designated almost entirely for clinic space, will have a fabulous public interest law office with great work space, and secure and comforting interview rooms for the student lawyers and their clients. Each of the lawyering seminars will have its own space, and there will be social and eating areas and lockers to store coats and books nearby. There will be many student group study rooms located throughout the Law School complemented by individual study and quiet areas in the library. The library will be equipped with the latest technology and will occupy the top floor.

What does the move mean for CUNY Law?

The very close proximity to seven subway lines, the 10-minute walk from the Long Island Railroad, and the location just across the river from Manhattan will allow our students easy and quick access to their field placements, internships, and legal jobs, while being anchored by the great new building. Clinic clients will have easy access to our nationally recognized clinic. We expect much more interaction with the legal community and social justice organizations, which will be only a short ride away. We plan on hosting many more conferences and speakers and look forward to increased participation in our classes by practitioners who can simply hop on a train and join us. Additionally, our new neighborhood is a few blocks from a recently renovated city park, five blocks from the new city park along the East River with spectacular views of Manhattan, a few blocks from P.S.1’s art site, two blocks from the historic Supreme Court building, and two blocks from a city parking garage that offers free space to bike riders.