



CASE STUDY

QCP Resolves Disputes to Keep Millwork Moving





AWI ARCHITECTURAL
WOODWORK
INSTITUTE
**QUALITY
CERTIFICATION
PROGRAM**

QCP Resolves Disputes to Keep MLK Library Millwork Moving Forward

Overview

Beginning in 2017, the *District of Columbia Public Library System* began a massive renovation of the Martin Luther King Jr. Library to ensure it would serve the community as intended and provide a welcoming, inspiring experience worthy of its namesake. The project turned into a three-year, \$211 million renovation, completed in September 2020.

An extensive portion of the renovation included custom millwork and casework that presented unique challenges to the woodworkers in meeting the expectations and goals of the client. QCP played a valuable role by helping to provide unbiased inspections and clear guidelines to settle disputes between stakeholders and ensure the best outcome for the overall project. The following case study includes details on the project related to the woodwork, as well as insights from the architect and representatives from the woodworking firms involved.

The Project

The Martin Luther King Jr. Library in Washington D.C., designed by famed architect *Mies van der Rohe*, opened in 1972. Located in the heart of D.C., the original design of the library featured hallmarks of van der Rohe's style, including exposed structural steel, large windows, and cubic simplicity. Over several decades, however, it had deteriorated functionally, structurally, and aesthetically.

The renovation project — led by *OTJ Architects* in partnership with Dutch firm *Mecanoo* — became an extensive redesign touching nearly every aspect of the library. The iconic exterior was preserved, as well as spaces like the grand entry hall, but much of the interior underwent significant improvements, including adding two spiraling staircases, an events atrium, public roof garden, indoor slide for kids, two-story auditorium, and more.

One of the overall design goals was to contrast the new with the old. Mies van der Rohe's design was very planar with sharp angles, primarily using glass and metal. To ensure the renovated parts of the library stood out to patrons, the architects designed the new components to have rounded or curved characteristics. Additionally, they introduced wood throughout the interior — choosing white oak for its durability, rich grains, long-lasting light tones, and regional availability. "Millwork was a major component of the design," said Steven Jensen, principal architect at OTJ.

Finding QCP-Licensed Woodworking Firms

Having previously worked with QCP and QCP-licensed woodworking firms, OTJ included QCP Certification as a requirement in the specifications for the project. As Mr. Jensen stated, “We understand the value [of QCP]...especially in a project like this where we’re looking at premium-grade woodwork and we’re looking for the quality and workmanship a world-class project deserves.”

OTJ turned to **ISEC**, a nationwide QCP-licensed firm, to bring the architectural woodwork of the redesign to life. ISEC acted as a subcontractor responsible for the install on the project, and turned to **Karn Custom Woodwork**, a QCP-licensed and FSC-certified firm with experience creating architectural woodwork for libraries, to fabricate the millwork and casework.

Not Your Standard Woodwork

The design called for several unique and technical woodworking challenges. As Brennan Becker of ISEC summarized, “There were straight and radiused wood veneer shelving, banquette seats...the scale of the job, the amount of paneling...the desk surrounds throughout the building for staff, and the back-of-house laminate casework.” The design called for long runs of shelving units, near 360-degree desks that would require wrapping a veneer, and reading countertops covering spans up to 100 feet that would be difficult to blend (because of white oak’s natural color variation) — all adding up to make fabrication and field joinery much more complicated.

Issues that Arose During Install

As with many projects, some of the design goals agreed upon in the plans and specifications were difficult to achieve in practice. The grain characteristics of the wood posed aesthetic challenges and the curvature of the veneers didn’t always cooperate. Overall, there were concerns that the premium-grade quality and specifications were not being met. Though not uncommon, this became somewhat trickier due to the logistics of having one subcontractor fabricating and another installing. In this situation, questions arose if standards were not being met and, if so, who was responsible.

The Value of QCP in the Project

The issues that arose during installation ran the risk of creating disputes with no clear resolution. If one party believed standards were met while another didn’t, it could have become a subjective dispute that ultimately ended up in court to settle the contract. Thankfully, the issues were able to be resolved relatively quickly because all parties understood the value of having QCP act as an objective resource with the sole purpose of ensuring the architectural woodwork adhered to the highest set of standards.

OTJ, ISEC, and Karn all recognized that following industry standards guarantees the highest quality and getting it QCP Certified allows a third party to provide a fair inspection of the work and clear-cut guidelines on what should be addressed. According to Brennan Becker of ISEC,

“Since QCP is an independent enforcer of the standards, it helped to solve the dispute. QCP came on sight and approved or disapproved to meet the contract. That third party helped to mediate.”

QCP inspectors were able to visit both the manufacturing facility and library to ensure every step of the project met the specified standards. With each inspector visit to the field, the architect and general contractor received a report on what needed to be fixed, and with each visit to the fabrication facility, they received a report on if it had been addressed. This ensured that expectations for fabrication and installation were always well defined and each deliverable thoroughly scrutinized. As Mr. Jensen said, “Another set of eyes is always good...and AWI — because they’re certifying the woodworkers — they’re reputation is on the line too, and they want to be sure their standards are held.”

Benefits Beyond Certification

As part of AWI, QCP’s aim isn’t simply to certify; it’s to improve architectural woodworking as a whole. Because this project required unusual work with

veneer, in particular, QCP sent one of its inspectors, a veneer expert, to the manufacturing facility in order to review the project and explain to Karn how the standards apply to the veneer and installation requirements and the challenges they would need to address to meet conformity. As Ken Kuney, owner of Karn Custom Woodwork, said, “This project was a graduate level course in veneer and education for my team.”

With Multiple Stakeholders, QCP is a Must

Without QCP, this world-class project could have gone very differently. There could have been weeks or months of back-and-forth between the architects and the fabrication team; the final appearance of the millwork might not have made anyone completely happy; and the relationships between OTJ, ISEC, and Karn Custom Woodwork could have been irrevocably damaged. QCP was able to act as both a guarantor of quality and an arbiter in the disagreements. Clearcut standards and clearcut application of those standards allowed everyone involved to feel confident in the outcome and proud of the work they did reinvigorating this architectural landmark.

Are You Ready To Register Your Architectural Woodwork Project?”

Learn everything you need to know about registering your woodworking project for QCP Certification

Visit awiqcp.org/project-registration to get started.

