



My office window

My office is on the 4th floor of a large concrete building, the McHenry Library building. The building was built with windows that open, an outside patio and some balconies. The windows, balconies, and patios are now meticulously sealed off from the outside. No air can cross in. No one can walk on the balconies or in the patio. The trees down there in that patio are dying.

Our department takes up part of the 4th floor and the basement of this concrete block of a building. We have a balcony with access to the outside but the doors are locked and no one has keys. We live in one of the most temperate mild climates on earth but the building's windows do not open. The whole building's climate is run by an HVAC system (Heating Ventilation and Air Conditioning System) which costs thousands of dollars a month, recirculates stale air, and keeps the building too cold all year round. Here in a climate where you could just turn the system off 340 days of the year and no one would miss it. During our many beautiful 75 degree sunny days I need a sweater in my office.

I like it outdoors. I like the fresh air, a breeze, the smell of life. After working in this building a year it was time to open the windows. I bought a five star Allen wrench from Ace hardware and picked up a butter knife from home. I undid the 3 screws with the wrench and used the butter knife to wedge in between the rubberized caulking. The hinges were there, working. My window opened!

What a huge guilty illegal pleasure, having a window that opened! How I enjoyed the illicit pleasure of fresh air. I had a string and a nail with which I reclosed the window – there were no latches on it. I tried to remember to close it again everytime that I left the office. One weekend I forgot. An angry librarian with nothing better to do noticed the window open and reported me to the powers that be. (I suspect a large overlap in the personality profile of certain librarians and overexuberant cops.)

I started getting emails demanding that the window be shut. I ignored

them. They escalated. Our department manager Michelle became involved. Our chairman Robert Boltje came to talk to me about the window. I was not willing to have my window resealed. My chairman is not pushy. Like me, he is a conflict avoider. Since I would not relock the window, he asked for explanations regarding why the window must be closed. The dean forwarded Robert's request to facilities.

There were three reasons given for the need to have my window locked shut and sealed off from outside air. The first reason was security. We were told that as long as my window was open on the 4th floor that "the campus police could no longer guarantee the security of the library." So this would mean someone had a fear of thieves sneaking into the library through my window on the 4th floor. Imagine a Spiderman character, or the guy from 'It Takes a Thief'. He has a grappling hook which he tosses up and deftly catches the lip of my window. He shimmies up this rope to the 4th floor. My window does not open wide enough for a body, So he pulls a crow-bar out of his pack and busts the hinges. (Umm, why again did he not just bust open the front window of the library?) Once inside the math department he must make his way into the library. The one door connecting the math department to the library 4th floor is alarmed. He opens that door. Alarm go off. Swiftly he runs down to the 3rd floor stacks. There he finds and steals all 7 volumes of Proust's "A la recherche du temps perdu" from the 3rd floor. From the 3rd floor he runs down to the precious Grateful Dead museum on the 1st floor. Alarms are going off. May as well have more go off. So he breaks into the Dead museum. He deftly steals an illustrated fan mail sent to Jerry Garcia in 1967. All entrances and exits from the library on the ground floor are locked with heavy lowering gates. So he runs back to the 4th floor and expertly shimmies down the rope with the 7 volumes of Proust and the fan mail in his back pack. The theft of the century has been successful!

Let us discount this reason.

The second reason given is that the precious collections in the library are very delicate and require constant climate control. As a money-saving decision, some collection of fools decided to put the half of the building that houses Education and Math on the same HVAC system as the library. Hence the entire building must be kept at the air-conditioned level and humidity required to keep the Grateful Dead Museum's collection of old posters, fan mail, and album covers at the same temperature of the Haight-Ashbury in the foggy summer nights on 1968. Alright. There is some logic there.

The third reason was so ridiculous that it has now vanished from my memory.

I continued to ignore the emails. Over 50 were generated. All up and down

the chain of command. They got more and more threatening. Eventually the Executive Vice Chancellor, one step below the Chancellor of the university became involved. Fines to the math department were threatened.

I succumbed.

A swat team was scheduled to take over my office and lock up my window. I made sure not to be there. They somehow broke the window pane trying to seal my window shut. (I still do not understand how.)

I got another 3 days of fresh air!

Now my window is locked up. No fresh air. Sealed environment. I tend to minimize my time up at the university now. I teach my classes, hold my office hours as required and hightail it back home. At my home office, I can breathe the outside air. And Dead Heads the world over can rest easier: the Grateful Dead Collection is now safer from Spiderman's plunders!