

Design Excellence and the Arts Division, *The Courthouse Series* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief Architect, Public Buildings Service, U.S. General Services Administration, 2000-2004).

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In the last fifteen years the national government in the United States has spent about \$15 billion on courthouses. These buildings have altered the local landscape and changed the face of federalism. The presence of the national government has been updated, beautified and it has become extraordinarily more monumental in a very short time. One of the keys to the look of the new federal courthouses is the work of the General Services Administration about which the GSA itself has had quite a bit to say.

One resource is a series of small books published by the GSA. Each one is 35-45 pages long and focuses on one of the new federal courthouses that have gone up around the country. The staff at the "Office of the Chief Architect" in the GSA calls these publications "White Books" because, though they have wonderful photographs on the cover, the dominant color of the books is white. Publishing these books is part of the process of making and then celebrating the buildings. The print run of each booklet is 3,000 and they are sent to libraries, schools of architecture and other outlets for the design community.

Marilyn Farley was my contact for these materials. She directs the "Design Excellence" program out of the GSA's Office of the Chief Architect located at 1800 F. Street, NW in Washington, DC. I met her at a presentation hosted by the Center for Architecture in New York City. The Center is the headquarters for the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. It maintains a street level presence on Mercer St. in Greenwich Village.

The occasion for our meeting was a panel discussion on the Moakley Federal Courthouse in Boston. Architect Henry Cobb, Justice Stephen Breyer, Judge Douglas P. Woodlock and other distinguished contributors to the creation of the courthouse led the session. On every seat was a 46 page booklet titled *John Joseph Moakley United States Courthouse and Harborpark*. On the cover it had a picture of the courthouse by Steve Rosenthal. Inside it had 25 color pictures, two old black and whites, and 5 architectural drawings along with text explaining the Boston courthouse project.

I found out later that the booklet on the Boston courthouse was only one of over a dozen celebrating courts in Phoenix, Long Island, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Cleveland, West Virginia, Montgomery, Indiana, Omaha, Youngstown and Seattle. The booklets are in every case representative of the design excellence that is the middle name of the office that produced them. There are eight others on federal buildings in addition to the ones on courthouses.

One of the striking things about these publications is that there is no author. While the buildings being celebrated are credited to architects, the photographs to photographers and the quotations in the books to the judges, artists and others involved with the projects, the only credit for the books is the "Staff of the Center." I was told that the books did not credit an author because the staff was paid by the American people and did not need recognition. One senses how extraordinary this project is in this notion of anonymity in the service of the public. Institutional authorship is a noble and rarely heard value. Like many of us I'm paid by the state too and I get credit for my work. And, many

of us have had to go to private providers for the text of Supreme Court opinions for years, not only dealing with private sources for public materials but having to pay for them too.

Each of the little books in the series, like the buildings, does some basic work. Each book places the buildings on a site, attributes construction to important judges, architects and construction firms and provides short biographies of the architect. They also contain materials on the art in the buildings and a biography of the artist who is chosen along with the architect as part of the design competition. Thus, the books put the creative stamp of those involved, particularly the GSA, on the projects.

Each one of the books ends with a statement about the program that was established in 1994 to “change the course of public architecture in the Federal Government.” Daniel Patrick Moynihan articulated the goals of the program in 1962 in what has come to be called “Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture.” These principles include avoidance of an official style and incorporation of the work of living artists along with the pursuit of excellence in architecture.

Moynihan’s text and the theory behind it are both quite extraordinary. Read closely, they help to explain what the federal government and its courts have been doing. The impact these buildings are having on the urban landscape and the dramatic new way that the federal government is being presented seems to me to rival the building boom of the New Deal. The current boom, little talked about in political terms and little noticed as an aspect of how law is constituted in America, may have consequences for how we perceive our government on a scale comparable to the early 1800s, another “Federal” period where legal and architectural change is evident.

The booklets also attend to the notion of civic architecture in a language that combines basic principles of American government and law with the way people in the arts describe their work. About the Long Island Courthouse, its booklet says, “The building strikes a balance between expressing its stateliness with a certain formality and expressing an openness with a public plaza and interiors that welcome visitors and let them know that the justice system represented within is open and accessible to all (p. 4).” The booklet for the Lloyd D. George Courthouse in Las Vegas has a section called “Designing a Civic Building” which reads, in part, “The exterior limestone, pre-cast concrete, and metal are durable and of high quality. Like the courthouse, they are meant to last (p. 16).”

There is a “Profile” of Sandra Day O’Connor in “her” booklet, the one for the huge new courthouse in Phoenix. The first woman on the Supreme Court, Justice O’Connor is presented in terms of her official achievements rather than her connection to the Southwest, other than to say that “her early years were spent on the family cattle ranch. The booklet on the Moakley contains a short biography of the U.S. Congressman from South Boston for whom the building is named. Congressman Joe Moakley died at 74 in 2001 after serving in the House for 20 years. He is associated with environmentalism and the clean up of Boston Harbor. Neither the biographies nor the booklets as a whole venture close to critique but neither do they seem false or so hyperbolic as to be difficult to read or inappropriate to offer here in a scholarly forum.

The booklets reflect on the buildings in other respects. The Moakley booklet calls the building in Boston “a lesson in civics through the medium of architecture.” It goes on to claim that the siting, form, layout and materials used in the building express “the fundamental democratic principles of equality, fairness, openness, and accessibility”. The claim is both grand and prosaic. The Boston courthouse is a stunning building and it does make places for the public, and not just for those who are going to court. There is a

dramatic waterfront park allowing visitors to have lunch or look back on the city of Boston.

The Boston building is made of brick and this feature is noted prominently. Brick is a traditional material in the city of Boston. It is also a construction material that employs many strong union hands. And, while the level of analysis that links the party affiliation of the workers to the buildings is absent, these associations are not difficult to see. In fact they are connections the judges involved in the buildings seem quite willing to acknowledge in the semi-private gatherings that celebrate their construction. Conversely, the O'Connor courthouse is made of glass necessitating an explanation for how that makes environmental sense in a "part of the country where summer temperatures can reach 122 degrees Fahrenheit...."

The challenge of this review and one of the things that has interested me throughout the project is what I see as a lack of critical tension in these little books. They seem to me to reflect the buildings where, once they are constructed we don't see the tension that goes into them. They may stand as something solid and functional, maybe even elegant and inspiring. Or they might develop problems, with all that glass in Phoenix, for instance. They may become much loved with age or they may go out of fashion like those that went up twenty years ago. Or, there may be design mistakes that make them hard to work in or very expensive to operate, such as when they get very hot.

These buildings do not look like courts in the traditional sense but my guess is that they are changing our idea of what a court looks like. I think that we have here a community constituted by the arts in a world of bureaucracy. Aesthetic bureaucrats are very active in redesigning what we understand as the local presence of the federal government. The GSA is giving us not only monumental buildings but published work by which to know these buildings.

In another generation we may think of the local presence of the federal government in terms of monumental architecture and the aspiration for justice. Or, it may be that these buildings give new meaning to big government and the limits on local prerogative that is part of a shift from local to national power.