

Rethinking Public Architecture: Case of the Contemporary American Courthouse

DEBAJYOTI PATI

CRAIG ZIMRING

Georgia Institute of Technology

INTRODUCTION

History is replete with instances where cultural and political forces have influenced architectural form in the public domain. Radical changes, in the form of federal architecture in the United States since the early 1990s, have brought the issue back into focus. Contemporary public buildings are changing in many ways. Courthouses for instance, are being located, in many cases, in non-descript sections of the CBD, breaking away from past trends of high-visibility sites. The new courthouses are beginning to define a distinct physical segregation from the immediate surrounding. Facades are getting more and more transparent. Approaches and entrances are increasing in visibility and articulation. Consequently, courthouses do not look like the traditional courthouse any longer. What are the forces driving these and other changes? What ideologies is the state attempting to convey through the new built forms? What role does the state envisages playing vis-à-vis the citizens in contemporary society? What are the dominant influences on public buildings today?

These issues are significant from many perspectives. From a political perspective, public buildings and spaces provide the means to articulate the character of the state, as well as provide a way to engage in a dialogue with the citizens. In the American society, which is disposed towards the private, carving out the presence of the state has been a challenging issue in the planning and design professions. Understanding the drivers of urban form is an important part of such an undertaking. From a design perspective, the challenge has been to translate abstract concepts such as political ideologies to built form. From a behavioral perspective, the challenge has been to understand the interpretations of architectural form and its implication on citizen's behavior. From all three perspectives, the importance of the above questions is evident.

These questions were brought into greater prominence during the mid-1990s when terrorist threats began to influence the design and operation of America's public buildings. Openness as a key political ideology surfaced in public forum discussions on federal architecture, which prompted an earlier study by the authors to develop an understanding of the abstract concept (Pati and Zimring, 2003). Openness, as an ideology, attracts considerable attention since the State's desire to infuse openness in federal buildings is viewed as conflicting with the need for more secured public settings. The authors attempted to render a better understanding of the way openness is conceived, interpreted and translated into built forms by design team members, and clarified the meaning of openness by examining several recent federal and state courthouse projects. Courthouses were chosen because they have significant symbolic and functional performance and the current ten billion (Wise, 2001) federal courthouse construction program provides a large corpus of high quality, new, public buildings. The authors conducted in-depth interviews with participants of five current and recent projects, attempting to understand how they interpreted openness, and examined the press accounts, of these and 13 other recent projects, in design journals and electronic sources. Qualitative data analyses suggested that openness is conceived in six different ways; openness as: 1) accessibility, 2) transparency, 3) exposure, 4) organizational clarity, 5) illumination, and 6) inclusiveness. The extent of influence that openness (as a driver) appeared to exert on the planning, programming and design strategies of new courthouses warranted a fresh look at the new federal courthouse program to unearth other influential drivers of contemporary federal architecture.

This study extends the previous work, and explores the wider ideological platform within which public forms are being carved. The paper draws examples from four new federal courthouse projects, of varying attributes, to articulate four

additional drivers of contemporary form. It is notable that, upon closer examination, some of the strategies used for infusing openness in courthouses appear crucial to other drivers as well. Those strategies are underscored at appropriate locations in this paper. The following sections begin with a brief account of the methodology, and proceed to introduce key ideological concepts that are influencing the design of contemporary federal courthouse buildings.

METHOD

The authors visited four newly constructed federal courthouses during the summer and early fall of 2002 as part of a (funded) post-occupancy evaluation study. The courthouses were selected (in consultation with the funding agency) to provide variations in size, location, and program. All four buildings were completed during 2000-2001, and were not in the corpus used to study openness. The portion of the study used for this paper focuses on analyses of the environment through ethnographic methods. The study was exploratory, and parts of the findings are drawn from semi-structured interviews with members of the courthouse design team and current users, including judges, courtroom deputies, reporters, facility managers, attorneys, and marshals on each site. The objective was to understand the ideological underpinnings of current design decisions and the various strategies adopted by designers to satisfy the ideology-form equation. Spaces explored, include the surrounding neighborhood, plazas and pathways within the site, entrance lobby and atrium spaces, public waiting areas, public amenities, libraries, cafeterias, and courtrooms. The authors took photographs, recorded observations on plan drawings, and transcribed all interviews. Interview transcripts, observation data, and physical descriptions were qualitatively analyzed to extract ideological objectives and their translations.

FOUR CASES

The four cases included in this study are the federal courthouses at Omaha, Nebraska, St. Louis, Missouri, Greeneville, Kentucky and Corpus Christi, Texas.

The Roman Hruska U.S. Courthouse in Omaha, Nebraska is a four-story low-rise building with two basement levels. It was designed by Pei Cobb Freed Architects in association with Dana Larson Roubal & Associates. The fifty-seven million dollar building was dedicated in October 2000. The 350,000 square feet facility is located on a 2.8 acre site in downtown Omaha between 17th and 19th Streets, and Dodge and Douglas Streets. The site, created by closing one block on 18th street, includes a huge public plaza that sits in front of the courthouse entrance. Within the structure is a four-story high atrium space that

serves as the central organizing feature around which nine courtrooms are arranged.

The Thomas Eagleton Courthouse in St. Louis, Missouri, was designed by Gyo Obata in association with Helmuth, Obata & Kassabaum. With 1,037,632 square feet of built-up space on 29 floors and 4 basement levels, it is one of the largest federal courthouses in the United States. The two hundred million dollar building, located on a 5.5 acre site, was dedicated in September 2000. The courthouse is designed as a part of the new Federal Mall linking the existing Gateway Mall to the north. Twenty-five courtrooms are accommodated around a central circulation core in the 29 floor high tower in a staggered-stacking arrangement. The site encompasses a one-block area of downtown St. Louis and is bounded by Walnut Street to the north, 10th Street to the east, Clark Street to the south, and 11th Street to the west. A large entry plaza supports the main entrance that faces east on 10th Street.

The James H. Quillen United States Courthouse, located in Greeneville, Tennessee, was designed by Hnedak Bobo Group and Allen and Hoshal, in association with Kallman McKinnell & Wood Architects. The site is located in the middle of a historic district and complements the surrounding architecture in style and form. It is a low-rise building with four floors and no basement. Four courtrooms are arranged linearly in pairs on one side of a central core that includes a sky-lit public atrium. The twenty seven million dollar construction was completed in July 2001. The 3.6 acre site is bounded by West Church Street on its north, West Depot Street on its south, North Irish Street on its east, and the Scott Niswonger Property and Donald Bible Property on its west.

The Corpus Christi U.S. Courthouse, Corpus Christi, Texas, was designed by Wilson Kullman McCord Architects. It is a low-rise building with three floors and one basement. The twenty seven million dollar construction was completed in February 2001. The Spanish/Italianate architecture reflects the traditional building style of the old federal building. The organizing feature of the courthouse is a three-story central atrium around which the courtrooms are arranged. The 'L' shaped, 3.2 acres site is located on the northern part of the central business district, adjacent to the southern terminus of Interstate 37 and Shoreline Boulevard.

CONTEMPORARY DRIVERS OF COURTHOUSE ARCHITECTURE

The study of four courthouse projects brings into focus four additional ideological issues that appear to be currently driving the form of public buildings. Courthouses, as public buildings, are changing in many ways. Most of the changes can be attributed to the need to create public architecture that contributes to community building, that creates safe places, that

is inviting, and that is a special places. The following sections discuss each driver in detail.

Need for a proactive role in community building

Contemporary design strategies are veering courthouses away from traditional high-profile sites to more non-descript locations. In doing so, there is a constant endeavor to achieve a balance between symbolic association with other buildings of importance and the economic vitality of the city. New projects are playing a proactive role in tangibly contributing to the local economy, which is a common theme across all four projects. In Greeneville, the project location in the downtown historic district was intended to attract major businesses to move to the area, to help create an economically vibrant downtown corridor. The headquarters of a local bank is already in the process of moving opposite the courthouse building, and other businesses are expected to follow suite. The Corpus Christi project location (at one edge of the central business district) is poised to extend the vitality of its core areas to the northern tip of the downtown along the bay front (Figure 1). While the economic ramifications of these projects might be more pronounced in smaller cities, in the larger cities of St. Louis and Omaha, the projects were also designed to revive economically depressed neighborhoods. The St. Louis project borders the glass and steel skyscraper section of the Gateway Mall on one side, and the warehouse district on the other. Proximity to the interstate highways on the warehouse side, and a diagonal pedestrian link to the Gateway Mall are intended to reverse the economy in that dilapidated section and revive the streetscape. In downtown Omaha, construction of large projects like the headquarters of the First National Bank of Omaha (Figure 2), adjacent to the Omaha courthouse, is a good testimony to the growth potential generated by the courthouse projects.

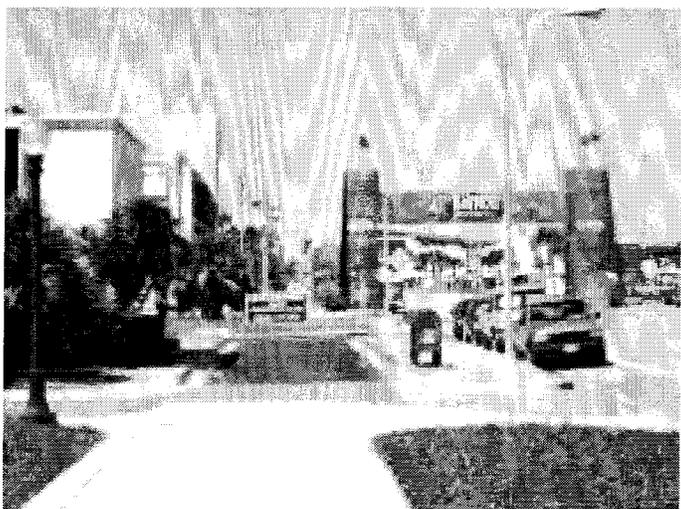


Fig. 1. Corpus Christi courthouse is poised to vitalize the northern tip of the downtown that is already host to many festivities.



Fig. 2. The new headquarters building of the First National Bank of Omaha is testimony to an acceleration of economic activities around the courthouse.

In doing so, the state seems to demonstrate a fundamental commitment to community growth (instead of maintaining solely an iconic presence). Through these efforts, the judiciary and the government appear to reinforce the notion that they belong to the public, and are committed to the development of the city and neighborhood that they are part of. While attempting to play a significant role at the community level, there is also a parallel focus on the individual.

Need to create a safe place

Securing life and property have always been important considerations, and hence, drivers of form. Contemporary security, however, has multiple connotations. Older-generation courthouses faced problems associated with securing people from disgruntled litigants. The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed new threats to American public buildings worldwide. Malevolent (terrorist) events necessitated steps to ensure security from external and unexpected sources, for both occupants and the public. The new threats came at a crucial juncture, just as the federal government was contemplating infusing greater openness in the design of public buildings.

Modern materials and technology, as well as more rigorous analysis of threat sources, have provided innovative solutions. In projects constructed after the Oklahoma City bombing, building setbacks, vehicular barriers, plinths, decorative bollards as landscape elements, and technology have begun to render courthouses as secure places. High plinths in Corpus Christi and Omaha, along with security bollards in most projects (Figure 3), provide security from vehicle bombs without compromising openness. The public plazas in Corpus Christi, St. Louis (Figure 4) and Greeneville are instances where security (standoff distance) and openness considerations have produced a unified design decision. Separation of entrance vestibules, more secured glazing and entrance screening devices, blast resistant structural design, electronic surveillance



Fig. 3. Security bollards in Corpus Christi: decorative and strong.

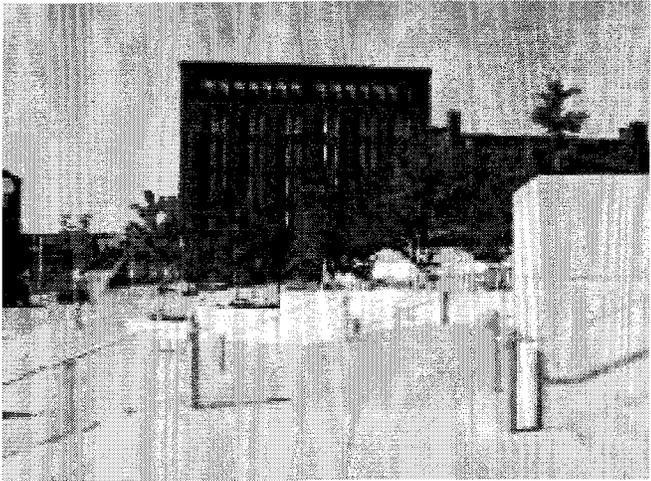


Fig. 4. Plaza in St. Louis renders openness while improving security.

and numerous other steps – not apparent to the eye – promise safety and security for the public, as well as the occupants. In building interiors, segregation of circulation routes and creation of multi-layered security zones have gone a long way in assuring security. New security measures, however, are manifested in new formal solutions. Moreover, new security measures pose a significant challenge to another vital need of the state – that of creating an inviting public place.

The need to create an inviting place

The monolithic architecture that was created during the modernist movement had the stakeholders in the judiciary believe that it alienated the citizens. Stakeholders in the judiciary express the desire to attract the public back into the courthouse. The judiciary feels that greater exposure to the functioning of the government would provide the necessary transparency. It is intended to enable the public to identify with government as being a part of themselves, as opposed to a

separate entity housed behind closed doors. A large part of infusing invitingness appears to share several conceptions of openness, as described in the earlier study (Pati and Zimring, 2003). In other words, a place could not be inviting if not open. Three conceptions of openness – accessibility, transparency and inclusiveness – appear to be shared in promoting the impression of inviting places. Articulating the public entrance, creating inviting entrances, designing the entry to be visible, providing multiple entrances, enabling views of the interior spaces from the outside, and enabling non-judicial events and functions inside the courthouse were common translations in the earlier study. Similar translations are evident in the desire for invitingness, particularly in entry design, way finding, public amenities, artwork, and public functions.



Fig. 5. Colonnaded public entry in Corpus Christi courthouse.

In creating inviting places, substantial attention is accorded to the building-street interface. The general strategy seems to be targeted towards seducing the public into grand public spaces in the courthouse interiors. In Corpus Christi (Figure 5), a wide promenade along the bay defines the eastern side of the courthouse, whose public entrance and atrium spaces enjoy unobstructed bay view. A classical colonnade marks the main pedestrian entry point. Gently rising steps draws one to the colonnaded entry from the promenade. In Omaha (Figure 6) the courthouse faces a plaza built on a closed surface street. A 'hat' built atop the principal entry point visually crowns the symmetrical façade and the plaza garden. The articulated entry point along with the plaza announces the entrance to the public. Designers of the Greenville courthouse adopted the strategy of skewing the building footprint to include a plaza that, through furnishing and detailing, creates a focal space for public gathering. An arcade through the full length of the front façade and a grand symbolic column (Figure 7) invites the public into a four-story high glass enclosed atrium. Highly articulated and visible entry point approached through a processional pathway appears to be the strategy adopted to create a force that would attract the public into the grand interior spaces.



Fig. 6. A plaza entry into Omaha courthouse articulated by a 'hat'.

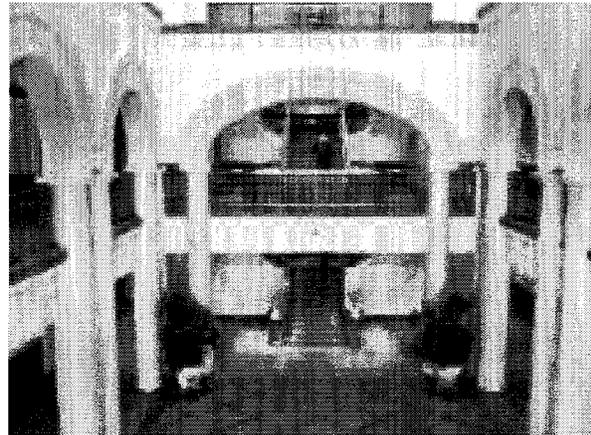


Fig. 8. Multi-story atrium and grand steps in Corpus Christi courthouse.



Fig. 7. Arcade and symbolic column defining public entry point in Greenville.

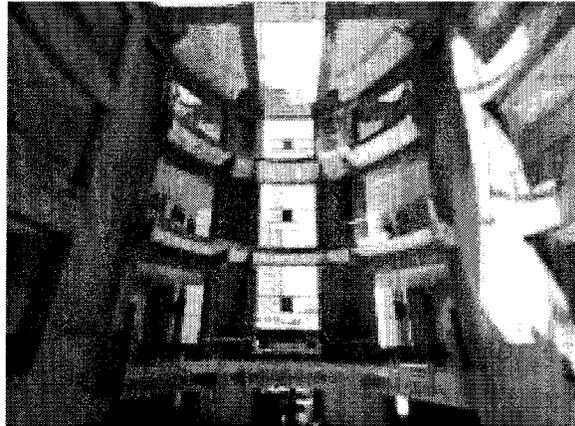


Fig. 9. Public spaces and natural light in the atrium space in Omaha.

Once inside, the atrium spaces in Corpus Christi (Figure 8) and Omaha (Figure 9) symbolically define a focal public place. The centrality of location and larger visual access to all levels in the courthouse is an integral part of contemporary design strategy. The symmetrical arrangement of functions around a central atrium renders comprehension of interior arrangements easier, and reduces way-finding problems—encouraging visitors to explore deeper the spaces within the courthouse. Grand steps, elegantly detailed ceilings and flooring patterns, natural light (Figure 10), vistas, and well-defined public waiting spaces, acting in combination, render the building an inviting place.

Strategically placed art elements within the atrium also play a crucial role. Terracotta work in Corpus Christi (Figure 11), and bronze artworks in Omaha and Greenville are prominently placed in the public areas. In addition to numerous paintings on the appeals courtroom floors, a large public park in St Louis, opposite the courthouse, is the prime beneficiary of the art-in-architecture program. Combined with an entry plaza, and a diagonal public pathway to the Gateway Mall in downtown St.



Fig. 10. Natural light in Corpus Christi atrium.

Louis, the park promises an inviting public domain to the city's residents and visitors.



Fig. 11. Terracotta artwork depicting courtroom proceeding in Corpus Christi public areas.

Finally, at least one of the four courthouses hosts functions unsupported in traditional courthouses—a relatively novel development. Functions hosted within the Omaha courthouse include courthouse tours by school children, national high school mock trial championship, bar receptions, dedication dinners, as well as judicial dinners.

In essence, new courthouse architecture is witnessing a range of design decisions, in the building-street interface as well as interiors, which are driven by a desire to create inviting public places and places that encourage exploration and familiarization. However, all of these, probably, also contribute to the need of creating a special place with very unique experiential attributes.

Need to create a special place

Simply inviting the public to the spaces within a courthouse would not serve the current ideological goals of the state. The need is to provide the public with an experience that would be distinctly different from other building types. With many designers and clients abandoning classical styles for new courthouses, creating experiential differences between government buildings and corporate structures constitute a major design challenge. Lest they may be viewed as relics of the past, without a comprehension of the present and foresight for the future, many design teams are shying away from purely classical designs. Modern materials and glazing technologies are being adopted. Large civic-scaled windows and large expanses of glazed curtain walls are replacing traditional stone-carved building facades, and, thus, getting dangerously close to the corporate look. In such a context, scale and symbolic elements appear to be playing a crucial role in creating a ‘special’ place

that houses an important branch of the state. Symbolic grand steps and columns, combined with grand-scaled atrium spaces, are frequently being used to convey the specialty of the functions housed within the structure.

Grand columns articulate the public entry point in Greenville and Corpus Christi, while the designers of St. Louis (Figure 12) embellished the symbolic touch with columns defining the building envelope throughout its 29 floors, topped with a dome that is visible from several blocks away. All four courthouses include, as an introductory statement, massive, awe inspiring, multi-level atrium spaces. Windows in the façade and roof admit natural light into these interior public spaces (a strategy shared with openness—as illumination. These devices, that symbolize openness, seem to also play a crucial role in creating places with special experiential attributes). Grand steps in the atrium spaces in all four courthouses are reminiscent of the Jefferson era public architecture. Terracotta art elements in Corpus Christi lobby depict court proceedings, while in Omaha the Federal Seal of the United States or America (Figure 13), claiming the center of the atrium, serves as a constant reminder of the federal presence. In essence the elements, combined together, create a metaphor for justice as desired or understood today. Irrespective of the individual translations adopted, the need seems to be in creating places with unique experience that would help create some distinction between the public and the private domains.

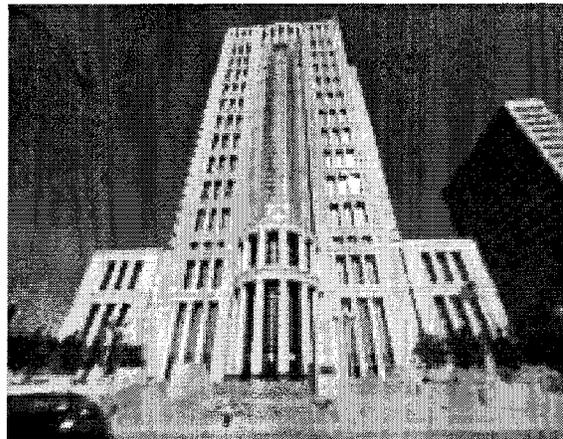


Fig. 12. Columns in courthouse façade in St Louis: symbolic of the traditional courthouse.

A CULTURAL CHANGE

To summarize, in addition to the need for openness, four other ideologies appear to significantly influence the form of public buildings today. Those include the need to create public architecture that contributes to community building, that create safe places, that is inviting, and that are special places. Further, some of these ideologies appear to be translated into design strategies similar to those in the translations of openness.

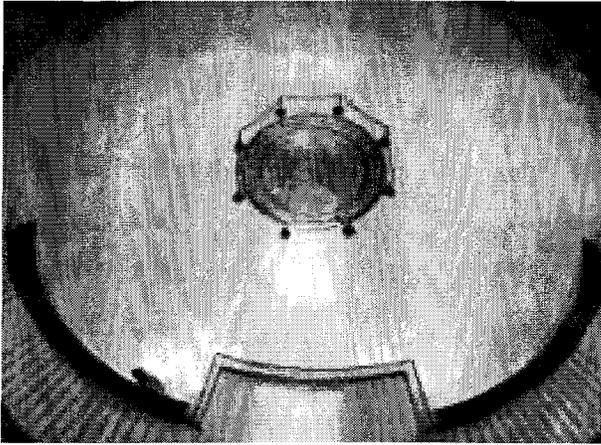


Fig. 13. Federal Seal between grand steps in Omaha Courthouse atrium: a reminder of the federal presence.

Contemporary forces influencing form are, apparently, not restricted to courthouse architecture. There appears to be a desire on the part of the state to revive the vibrant public domain of traditional America, albeit in a different form. Thus, public buildings, from border stations to police stations and embassies, at the federal as well as state level, are attempting (in various degrees) to redefine the way they wish the citizens to perceive and interact with the state. This change is better appreciated in a larger historical context.

Some argue that the public realm in America is on the decline, while others assert that it is going through a transformation. Irrespective of the viewpoint, the general consensus is that during the past centuries the public life has been significantly affected by the changes brought forth in the economic, political and the technological arena. The public life in the cities before the eighteenth century was molded and driven by activities of the community, including News, water, garbage, shopping, religion and politics, which forced a merger of social and public activities resulting in a vibrant public domain (Lofland, 1998). Since then several things have changed. Modern technology has driven several public and social functions indoor and into private homes (Glazer & Lilla, 1987). New forms of association and communication have emerged, and as a result, say Carr et al (Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 1992), the types of relationships witnessed in public places in the past have undergone radical transformation. Public functions in traditional public places are also not being supported by the general public (according to Jackson, 1987), and that has pushed such activities to other forms of spaces like school auditoriums, college campuses and strip malls.

Perhaps, the most significant transformation occurred because of the economic transformation following the industrial revolution. The industrial-age economic landscape affected significantly the way people conducted daily business, and that had an

impact on public spaces. The demise of the traditional public realm can be attributed specifically to the birth of industrial capitalism and secularism (Sennett, 1987). If the economy changed, so also did the government. The thrust has consistently been on privatization and reduction of the public sector, which resulted in an erosion of the public domain (Dietsch & Steeneken, 1981). More and more public functions are being performed by private agencies and consequently, the modern government has ended up as a contingent force (Lyndon, 1987). Even the nature of public symbolism has undergone change. Since the Jefferson era, when the classical Roman style incorporated into government building design was meant to symbolize democracy, the symbolism of western government has changed significantly. An appropriate example is the European Parliament in Strasbourg (Mornement, 1999). The mildly curving form and the transparency built into the glass and steel façade is explained to be representative of democratic values. However, as Mornement notes in his reference to Jane Loeffler's book on American Embassies, the idea has also been for the governments to project themselves as corporate institutions. As more and more government buildings adopt the corporate image, more and more public places go indoors, and more and more private architecture challenge the public monumentality, what would provide the appropriate public platform for establishing the state's presence and engaging the citizens?

The onus falls on the only institution that, at least in the foreseeable future, is probably not going to don the corporate mantle: the courthouse. Design of the contemporary courthouse and understanding its formal drivers, thus, assumes considerable significance considering that the courthouse, through its design, constitutes one of the few avenues that offers a platform for state-citizen engagement. This study is a beginning to understand the cultural, political, and other drivers that are influencing the form of contemporary public buildings. A study on its ramifications on the future American public domain could be of interest and significance to designers, historians and political scientists.

REFERENCES

- Carr, S., Francis, M., Rivlin, L. G., & Stone, A. M. (1992). *Public space*. Cambridge [England]; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Dietsch, D., & Steeneken, S. (1981). *Architecture in the public realm* (Vol. 3). New York: Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture and Planning : [distributed by Rizzoli].
- Glazer, N., & Lilla, M. (1987). Introduction. In N. Glazer & M. Lilla (Eds.), *The Public face of architecture : civic culture and public spaces*. New York; London: Free Press; Collier Macmillan.
- Jackson, J. B. (1987). Forum Follows Function. In N. Glazer & M. Lilla (Eds.), *The Public face of architecture : civic culture and public spaces* (pp. 117-123). New York; London: Free Press; Collier Macmillan.
- Lofland, L. H. (1998). *The public realm : exploring the city's quintessential social territory*. Hawthorne, N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter.

Lyndon, D. (1987). Public Buildings: Symbols Qualified by Experience. In N. Glazer & M. Lilla (Eds.), *The Public face of architecture : civic culture and public spaces* (pp. 155-176). New York: London: Free Press: Collier Macmillan.

Pati, D. and Zimring, C. (2003). Exploring Openness of Contemporary Federal Architecture. *People Shaping Places Shaping People*, Proceedings of EDRA 34 Conference, Minneapolis, May. (pp. 143-149).

Sennett, R. (1987). The Public Domain. In N. G. a. M. Lilla (Ed.), *The Public Face of Architecture* (pp. 26-47): The Free Press.

Moriment, A. (1999). You're so transparent. *World Architecture*, 81. (pp.31-35).

Wise, M. Z. (2001). Judging design excellence. *Architecture*, 90(1), 65-77.