



RETHINKING OPENNESS: COURTHOUSES IN THE UNITED STATES

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DESIGN ISSUE

This study investigated the meanings of *openness* in respect to courthouse design from the viewpoints of designers and critics. Their conceptions and interpretations were obtained in the context of several recent federal and state courthouse projects in the United States.

BACKGROUND

Public architecture is considered by many as symbolizing the political notions of power, authority, economic vitality, and civic pride. Late 20th century US architecture, as surmised by some, articulates openness – a reflection of the government’s responsiveness, transparency, and accessibility. However, there was no explicit common understanding among designers as to what precisely ‘openness’ entails. Openness has been varyingly interpreted to imply ‘physical accessibility’, ‘visibility’, and ‘transparency’. Further, the security threats of a post 9/11 era are generally perceived to conflict with the openness of public buildings. The authors contend that in order to draw a balance between openness and security concerns, it is necessary to first understand what openness means.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research design included conducting interviews of the members of the design team, and doing a content analysis of interview transcripts and published records on eighteen courthouse projects. The interviews were semi-structured with questions designed to probe issues related to siting, access, massing, style, footprint, materials, and program with the intent to uncover the ideological foundations and design translations of openness.

The sample included 18 courthouse projects (2 state and 16 federal), which were newly occupied or under different phases of procurement. All projects started after 1991. Five of the federal courthouses (then) were in various stages of planning, design, and construction; and the two state courthouses had been built recently. The researchers interviewed seven design team members, of whom two were architects and five were judges. The interviews were all conducted between March and October of 2001. Published descriptions and criticisms of the remaining courthouses were gathered from an extensive review of literature. Content analysis of both the published records and the interview transcripts were conducted.



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FINDINGS

Data analyses identified six different conceptions of openness: (1) Accessibility, (2) Transparency, (3) Exposure, (4) Organizational Clarity, (5) Illumination, and (6) Inclusiveness.

Openness as accessibility refers to creating courthouses that are easily accessible to the public – *“courthouses not easily accessible cannot be perceived as open”*. Accessibility has been viewed from three perspectives: (1) accessibility to a courthouse site; (2) accessibility to a courthouse building from the nearest transfer point – public transport, parking lot, and so forth; and (3) accessibility to various spaces within a courthouse building.

Accessibility to a courthouse site translated to decisions on courthouse location within the city as well as the larger urban context. Accessibility to a courthouse building witnessed design translation in the areas of entry articulation, entrance visibility, invitingness of the public entry, incorporating multiple public entrance points, mitigation of entry security devices, and an enhanced focus on universal access. Accessibility to spaces within a courthouse building typically found translations via the implementation of multiple routes to key interior public access spaces.

Openness as transparency refers to creating courthouses where the operations of the ‘State’ are perceived as transparent by the citizens – *“opaque courthouses cannot be perceived as open”*. The concept of transparency has been viewed in two ways: (1) inside-out transparency, and (2) outside-in transparency. Inside-out transparency pertains to maintaining visual links between courthouse interior spaces with important local landmarks – a way to rooting the federal government within the local community. Outside-in transparency pertains to creating strategic visual links between the outdoor spaces to key indoor spaces – a way to expose the operations of the federal government to the general public. Both forms of transparency were translated into creative design of courthouse envelopes to afford and maintain the critical visual links, without compromising security.

Openness as exposure refers to enhancing the engagement of the federal government with the public through greater perceived interactions – *“courthouses that are hidden (not exposed) cannot be perceived as open”*. Exposure was conceived in two ways: (1) local scale exposure, and (2) city-scale exposure. Both pertain to enhancing the familiarity of the courthouse building and the address value of the location. Both were translated to identifying courthouse locations that are visible at both scales and afford enhanced interaction through positioning in heavy traffic areas.

Openness as organizational clarity refers to clear organization of the courthouse form and massing in the interior as well as exterior, to enhance the comprehension of different functional zones – *“courthouses where organization of functional areas are not clear cannot be perceived as open”*. This conception of openness found design translation in creative massing of exterior and interior spaces with clear circulation routes to enhance way finding.



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Openness as illumination refers to quality of natural light – “*courthouses with dark (unclear) spaces cannot be perceived as open*”. Typically this conception was translated into drawing natural light into as many spaces within the building as possible and avoiding low-intensity lighting in areas accessible to the public.

Finally, openness as inclusiveness refers to including non-courthouse related functions in the courthouse program – “*courthouses not entertaining social functions cannot be perceived as open to the society*”. This conception was translated into the inclusion of program areas that may draw non-users to a courthouse premises and to the indoors, such as restaurant, day-care center, and so forth.

The implications of the above six broad categories of openness were seen to overlap, which led the authors to propose a preliminary framework of openness when referring to US courthouses. This framework comprised of four interrelated dimensions:

- 1) Physical: refers to the site, building, interior spaces and location.
- 2) Symbolic: refers to the portrayal of transparency and visual clarity.
- 3) Social: refers to inclusion, and increased interaction with a larger community.
- 4) Cognitive: refers to making sense of the different spaces and functions within the courthouse.

Finally, the full article offers a comparative assessment of the openness dimensions and security needs. The study suggests that openness attributes can be incorporated in courthouses without compromising security. Moreover, areas posing conflict can be creatively addressed to develop solutions that enhance both security and openness.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN PRACTICE

For design teams embarking on a new or renovation courthouse project, consider the following:

- Findings of this study offer a platform for informed dialogue with the US Marshals and Federal Protective Service. Explore creative solutions to areas identified as conflicts.
- The six domains of interpretations, and sub-domains, offer a wide palette of design translations. Discuss each area with the owner to identify the ones that satisfy the unique requirements of the specific context of the project.
- They also impact a wide array of design decisions. These decisions can be expected to have a direct impact on capital cost. The wide palette offers numerous opportunities for optimization of openness within budget, without compromising security.
- Openness may be explored through, among others:
 - ✓ Locating the courthouse near public transportation.
 - ✓ Locating the courthouse on heavy-traffic corridors.
 - ✓ Locating the courthouse on a site visible from one or more major highway/s.



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- ✓ Optimize engagement with pedestrian and vehicular traffic; enhance visibility of the courthouse.
- ✓ Designing easy access from public parking.
- ✓ Designing for universal access.
- ✓ Designing a processional entry sequence from transfer points to the main public entrance.
- ✓ Using form and materials to design articulated entrances.
- ✓ Having multiple public entrances, if feasible.
- ✓ Reducing visual impact of entrance security by incorporating security features in millwork.
- ✓ Clear spatial organization and public circulation; multiple circulation options to interior public spaces.
- ✓ Well lighted interior environment; natural light in public access areas.
- ✓ Large areas of exterior glazing to visually connect interior and exterior.
- ✓ View of important interior public spaces from the streets and sidewalks.
- ✓ Incorporate non-courthouse functions, if feasible, to attract general public into the courthouse exterior and interior spaces.

LIMITATIONS

The study did not explore how the users (employees and public) respond to the design strategies adopted to infuse openness. Further, larger sample size is needed to explore variations across cultural contexts. This study is relevant to the cultural context of the United States only and may be limited to federal courthouses (though there is reason to believe that they are likely to apply to all types of courthouses).

ADAPTED FROM

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