

Public Buildings Should Set the Standard

by Edward T. McMahon

Your community is growing. Perhaps it needs a new elementary school, a fire station, or a bigger courthouse. Where should these buildings be constructed? What should they look like? And how much public money should be invested to ensure quality design and construction?

George Washington offered an answer to these questions more than 200 years ago when he said, “public buildings in size, form and elegance must look beyond the present day.”

People have long understood that public buildings can help nurture feelings of heritage and community that enrich a nation and its people. Public buildings and spaces create identity and

sense of place. They give communities something to remember and admire. The challenge facing public architecture is to provide every generation with structures that link them with their past, fill them with pride, and reinforce their sense of belonging.

Public buildings should set the standard in a community. Public buildings with civic stature, quality materials, and prominent settings project a sense of permanence and human scale that expresses the dignity and importance of public institutions.

During the 18th, 19th, and first half of the 20th century, throughout America city halls, courthouses, post offices, and public schools stood as the community’s

most beautiful and important buildings – and these buildings were almost always located downtown or in other central locations. In the last half of the 20th century, however, public buildings were frequently relegated to little more than utilitarian boxes. We designed schools and libraries that resembled correctional facilities, and built fire stations and post offices that looked like warehouses. At the same time we moved many of our public buildings from downtown to new locations on the strip far from town.

SEEKING HIGHER QUALITY PUBLIC BUILDINGS

People appreciate public buildings that express the dignity, permanence,

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Built in 1884, the Shackleford County Courthouse in Albany, Texas recently received a \$1.7 million grant through the Texas Courthouse Preservation program (described on page 7) to repair and upgrade its electrical and plumbing systems.

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and importance of civic institutions, and which harmonize with their surroundings. In recent years, there have been a growing number of instances where communities have demanded higher quality in the design of new public buildings and resisted efforts to move post offices, city halls, and other civic institutions to out-of-the-way locations.

Communities have also increasingly resisted the “cheaper is better” approach and demanded higher quality in the design of new public buildings.

Warren County, Virginia, for example, recently resisted an effort to move its courthouse out of downtown Front Royal to a greenfield site along a highway outside of town. Instead, Warren County renovated its historic courthouse and built a beautiful, architecturally compatible addition to it.

Keeping the courthouse downtown did cost more, but Warren County officials realized that there is a big difference between cost and value. Downtown is the heart and soul of the community and the cornerstone of civic identity. A public commitment to staying downtown also encourages private businesses to do the same.

By rehabilitating and expanding its existing facilities, the County helped to



E. MCCAMMON



Contrast the new Allegheny Middle School annex (on the right) with the main school building (on the left). Both are in use today.



Warren County Virginia Courthouse

stabilize Front Royal’s downtown, increase the value of nearby properties and uses, and ensure that existing infrastructure would be used more efficiently. On the other hand, if the County had moved its offices out of downtown, private businesses would have followed. Keeping the courthouse in the core helped both the Town and the County.

FEDERAL BUILDINGS & THE CASE OF THE POSTAL SERVICE

While local and state government buildings are often the “crown jewels” of a community, the nation’s most important landlord is the federal government. Locating and keeping federal facilities in downtown areas can be good for everyone’s bottom line. In fact, federal policy gives preference to locating new facilities in downtown historic buildings and districts.  *Federal Requirements*, p. 5

Unfortunately, one major federal agency – the U.S. Postal Service – considers itself exempt from these requirements. In the 1990’s, the Postal Service began moving post offices out of downtowns, often with little public notice and frequently to locations that ignored local zoning ordinances.



SCOTT McDONALD, HEDRICH-BLESSING

Georgia Neighbors: *While many of the public buildings constructed since World War II have been uninspiring, quite a few can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the best designed public buildings of an earlier age. Take a look, for example, at the old and new Glynn County courthouses in Brunswick, Georgia. Located next to each other, both are in use. The old courthouse (left) was built in 1907, while the new courthouse (right), designed by Hansen, Lind, Meyer, Inc., opened in 1991.*

The Postal Service is the most visible and ubiquitous federal institution in America. Indeed, in many small towns, the local post office is the only federal building. Because of the unique presence of post offices, many citizens equate their treatment at the hands of the post office with their relationship with the Federal Government in general.

The daily visits that citizens make to local post offices have shaped the development pattern of many towns. Business districts have grown up around post offices, allowing postal customers to shop, dine, and take care of other needs in one convenient area. For example, a 1990 survey of Iowa communities by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Program found that 80 percent of consumers who shopped downtown did so because of access to the post office.

Despite their role as community institutions, many post offices have been moved from downtown or town center locations to outlying sites, frequently in commercial strip developments. Local residents and officials have often received little notice of these shifts. Moreover, it has not been uncommon for these relocations to contradict policies set out in community comprehensive plans.

Currently, there is no statutory requirement for the Postal Service to consult with the community or their customers before making relocation decisions. What's more, the Postal Service considers itself exempt from local zoning and building laws – and has frequently ignored them.

When the Postal Service made no attempt to coordinate its facilities planning with the Portland, Oregon land use plan, and then refused to build sidewalks to a major new postal facility, Congressman Earl Blumenauer got mad. He introduced legislation – “The Post Office Community Partnership Act” – in the 105th Congress that would require the Postal Service to obey local land use and planning laws and work with local

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Federal Requirements:

In May 2000, Congress codified Executive Order 13006, originally signed by President Clinton in 1996. The Executive Order provides, in part, that:

“The Federal Government shall utilize and maintain, wherever operationally appropriate and economically prudent, historic properties and districts, especially those located in our central business areas. . . . When locating Federal facilities, Federal agencies shall give first consideration to historic properties within historic districts. If no such property is suitable, then Federal agencies shall consider other developed or undeveloped sites within historic districts. Federal agencies shall then consider historic properties outside of historic districts, if no suitable site within a district exists.”

As the National Trust for Historic Preservation noted in applauding the May 2000 legislation, “The signing of H.R. 834 ended a long wait for . . . codification of the Clinton Executive Order issued in 1996 as a means of making the federal government a major partner in the fight against urban sprawl.”



Post Office Bill

The “The Post Office Community Partnership Act” introduced by Congressman Earl Blumenauer, Senator Jim Jeffords, and Senator Max Baucus, in addition to requiring community notification of possible post office relocations, would require the Postal Service to consider, among other factors:

- the extent to which the post office is part of a core downtown business area;
- any potential effect of the relocation, closing, consolidation, or construction on the community served by the post office; and
- whether the community served by the post office opposes a relocation, closing, consolidation, or construction.



Modern Fire Stations

Rebecca Zurier in her fascinating book, *The American Firehouse*, observes that: “By the time the United States entered the space race, the American fire station, though filled with an impressive array of equipment, was likely to be one of the least impressive buildings in the community. And somehow the public – architects, city building departments, neighbors, and the firemen themselves – had come to expect no better.”

While Zurier attributes part of this trend to municipal cost-cutting, she also notes that many no longer consider firefighters “folk heroes” – instead viewing them as municipal blue-collar workers who “do not need or deserve aesthetic buildings.”



Two small town fire stations. A typical, post WW II garage-style building (above) and a more thoughtfully designed structure in Port Royal, South Carolina (below). Good design is possible.



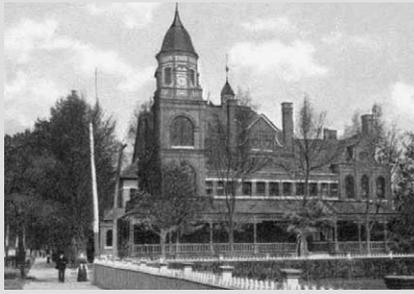
E. MCMILLON



Judicial Centers & Governmental Complexes

“Today, instead of courthouses, we build ‘judicial centers’ and ‘governmental complexes’ to accommodate the legal traffic of a society that has grown in numbers and complexity far beyond what the visionaries of the eighteenth century ever dreamed. Many modern courthouses look more like mammoth office buildings, with little symbolic or traditional significance and even less regard for what we used to call ‘the majesty of the Law.’ ... As much as ever, our courthouses are a reflection of society, and it is not an altogether pretty picture.” From *Virginia’s Historic Courthouses*, by John O. and Margaret T. Peters (University of Virginia Press, 1995).

Today’s Escambia County Courthouse (known as the M.C. Blanchard Judicial Building) in Pensacola, Florida, is typical of the hundreds of modern judicial centers across the county; contrast this with the old Escambia County Courthouse (top).



ESCAMBIA COUNTY

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citizens before making relocation decisions that could dramatically affect the fabric of a community.  *Post Office Bill*, p.5

Despite support from over 240 congressional co-sponsors, the bill has not yet passed, but it has forced the Postal Service to improve its public involvement procedures and has temporarily halted the closing of existing downtown facilities.

SUMMING UP:

Public buildings have prestige or “flagship” value in our communities. Their location and design is vitally important to the health and well being of cities and towns. While cost and efficiency are clearly major considerations when it

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C. BEALE

The small, but dignified Lake County Courthouse in Two Harbors, Minnesota, close to the shores of Lake Superior.



C. BEALE

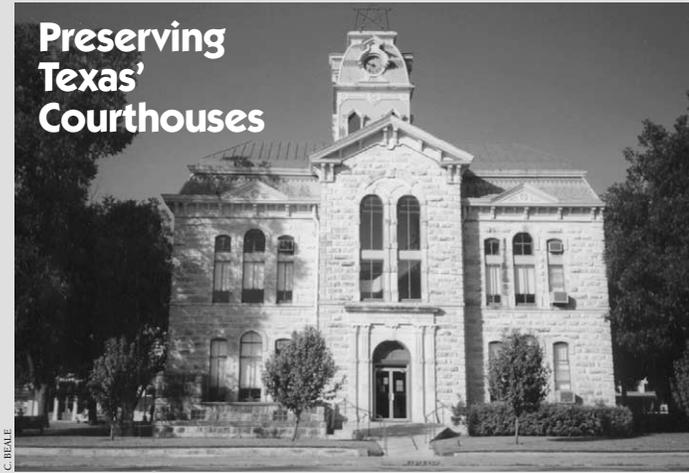
Patterned after a French chateau, the 1902 Dallas County Courthouse provides a majestic presence in the small town of Adel, Iowa, west of Des Moines.



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Courthouses at the turn of the 19th century were frequently placed in the heart of downtown, and often set in the middle of a large central square. This can be seen in a panoramic view of downtown Shreveport, Louisiana. Unfortunately, the Shreveport Courthouse pictured in this 1919 view no longer exists.

Preserving Texas' Courthouses



The Second Empire style Lampasas County Courthouse was built in 1884. A \$2.3 million preservation grant will allow for essential structural repairs.



The Romanesque Revival style DeWitt County Courthouse in Cuero, Texas was dedicated in 1897.



In 1998, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named Texas' courthouses to its list of 11 most endangered historic places in the United States. As the National Trust noted: "The historic seats of county government in Texas represent some of the finest works of public architecture in the Lone Star State – and the nation. Their location and design helped establish each county's unique identity while embodying the majesty, solidity and egalitarian ideals of democratic government. All 225 of the state's historic courthouses are still community focal points, with 201 remaining in active

government use. But many of them – including some of the oldest and most architecturally distinguished – have fallen into disrepair due to inadequate funding for preservation and routine maintenance."

Instead of taking offense at the National Trust listing, Governor George W. Bush and the Texas Legislature responded positively – and rapidly – by establishing an innovative program to provide state matching grants to counties needing to renovate their old courthouse buildings. Within little more than a year, grants ranging from \$37,000 to over \$3 million have been distributed to some 47 counties, making full use of the Legislature's

\$50 million initial allocation. Many of the counties received funding to develop architectural plans for courthouse renovations, the first step in the preservation process, while others received funds to cover actual repair and restoration work.

The Texas Historical Commission, which administers the grant program, found the response to the program "overwhelming" and noted that "the need is so great that we presently have 99 counties needing more than \$201 million for courthouse restoration projects." Additional grant funds will be sought during the next session of the Texas Legislature.



The Lee County Courthouse in Giddings, Texas, was designed by noted Texas architect J. Riley Gordon in the Romanesque Revival style, and completed in 1899. Lee County was awarded a \$2.3 million preservation grant to repair the building's masonry, restore its windows, and replace several mechanical systems.

Courthouse Grant Criteria:

Eligibility for a grant requires the county to have adopted a master preservation plan for its courthouse. In addition, the Texas Historic Commission gives weight to the following criteria (among others) in scoring applications:

- Status of the building as a functioning courthouse before and after the project
- The county's willingness to place a preservation easement on the courthouse
- Age and historic significance of the courthouse
- Degree to which the courthouse is endangered
- Extent of the matching grant provided by the county
- Evidence of the county's efforts to protect and enhance surrounding historic properties, and promote other county-wide preservation efforts



The Denton County Courthouse-on-the-Square, in Denton, Texas, is home to the county commissioners' and county judge's offices, as well as a museum. The County received a \$462,000 preservation grant to enable preparation of architectural plans and specifications for the courthouse's renovation.

Courthouse Action

Courthouses have long served as places for the public to attend, whether to witness a trial, attend an exhibition, or participate in a demonstration. As authors Herbert A. Johnson & Ralph K. Andrist have noted, "A century ago the courthouse was the scene of most local entertainment, including concerts, theatrical performances, and various exhibitions. More often, though, it was court trials and political debate that drew crowds into the building."¹ Courthouses today still serve as focal points when major public issues or concerns arise, witness our familiarity with the courthouses of Leon, Palm Beach, Broward, and Dade Counties.

¹ *Historic Courthouses of New York State*, by Herbert A. Johnson & Ralph K. Andrist (Columbia University Press, 1977)

 **Resources:**
Designing the City: A Guide for Advocates and Public Officials, by Adele Fleet Bacow (Island Press, 1995).

Cities: Back From the Edge, by Roberta Brandes Gratz with Norman Mintz (John Wiley & Sons, 1998).

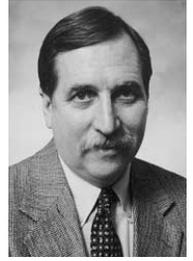
"Keeping the Post Office Downtown," by Kennedy Smith and Laura Skaggs, *Forum News*, National Trust for Historic Preservation, July/August, 1997.

Our thanks to Calvin Beale and James Long for generously allowing us to use several of their courthouse photos. Beale is Senior Demographer with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service. Long works as a Systems Analyst for the Saturn Corporation in Spring Hill, Tennessee. Both share a love of photographing historic courthouse buildings. To see more of Beale's photos, go to: www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/rural/photos/; for additional photos by Long, go to: www.telalink.net/~scaevola/

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comes to designing and siting new facilities, there are other equally important considerations. Public buildings should set the standard in a community. For those who argue that cost should be the overriding factor, consider what Oscar Wilde once observed, "a cynic is a man who knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing." ♦

Edward McMahon is a land use planner, attorney, and director of The Conservation Fund's "American Greenways Program." He is former president of Scenic America, a national non-profit organization devoted to protecting America's scenic landscapes. McMahon's column appears regularly in the Planning Commissioners Journal.



On-Line Comments

"Excellent article! Our small community, Rice Lake, Wisconsin, is presently building a new City Hall downtown. We spent the money to 'do it right.' Our current City Hall was built in 1903 and the desire of our City Council was that the new City Hall would last 100 years also. There are no 'frills' in the building design, but the construction is pleasing to the eye and will keep the center of government downtown. It is scheduled for opening in the spring of 2001."

— Al Arnold, Rice Lake, Wisconsin (Mayor when the new City Hall design was completed)

"McMahon's article seems very timely, considering the ongoing battles between communities and their post offices. Our town was fortunate to keep its post office in the existing location by helping the Postal Service negotiate new delivery truck access across an adjacent property which facilitated an addition to the building. Otherwise, the Postal Service might have moved the post office to a bigger site somewhere on the fringes of the community."

— Aaron Henson, AICP, Planning & Zoning Department, Milton, Vermont

"The comments on the postal service struck home. Ours is about to move into their new 'digs' down on U.S. 50 by McDonald's and Steak and Shake and all that other stripped out mess. Their, soon to be former, location was in the heart of town. The post office serves as a sort of 'gossip fence' in many small towns. You see neighbors and friends there often and catch up on news. It also serves the local businesses and banks in town. Our mayor [and the mayor of the neighboring town] attempted to stop the move. They went out seeking signatures on petitions, they went to Indianapolis to petition legislators, and even to Washington D.C. ... It didn't work – the Post Office is moving!"

— Christine Mueller, Dearborn County, Indiana

"Martin County, Florida is in the third year of a five-year program to construct or replace libraries in each of the county's historic communities. The libraries are individually designed to reflect the character of each of the communities to reinforce their individual identities. High quality and a 'presence' in each community have been emphasized in the design criteria. The two libraries that are already in use have been extremely well received and, as a side benefit, have had

significant private sector financial support. That support is due, at least in part, to the civic pride the new libraries have generated."

— William Thornton, Martin County, Florida



View of the main library in Stuart, Florida.