

UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE

San Antonio, Texas



The United States Courthouse in San Antonio, Texas, was designed and constructed under the U.S. General Services Administration's Design Excellence Program, an initiative to create and preserve outstanding public buildings that will be used and enjoyed now and by future generations of Americans.

March 2024

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The architects sought to deliver a truly innovative building, one that would invert the typically cloistered and fortresslike bearing of the courthouse typology while consuming less energy and putting users in direct contact with the natural environment.

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FROM HEMISFAIR PAVILION TO HALL OF JUSTICE

In 1959, as San Antonio, Texas, looked forward to its 1968 semiquincentennial, local merchant Jerome K. Harris lobbied the Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce to organize a “Hemis-Fair” observing the city’s 250th anniversary and its shared cultural heritage with Latin America. A celebration of hemispheric unity resonated so strongly with congressman Henry B. González—who also pictured the fair as an opportunity to expand San Antonio’s trade presence in Mexico and Central America—that he became the proposal’s leading champion by 1962. That same year, the nonprofit organization San Antonio Fair, Incorporated was founded to earn international-exposition designation for HemisFair ’68 and to realize the event. It opened in April 1968 and welcomed 6.3 million visitors over a 6-month run.

Historians look back at HemisFair ’68 as a turning point for San Antonio, by kickstarting investments in hospitality that ultimately yielded farther-reaching economic expansion. Indeed, the city lacked a convention center before 1968, despite boasting of significant travel destinations

like The Alamo. Tourism today employs one in eight local workers, and San Antonio is the seventh most populous city in America.

Foreseeing such long-term transformation, San Antonio leaders repurposed several HemisFair ’68 facilities to support that change. They identified one HemisFair exhibition hall as the much-needed convention center, and the 92-acre fairgrounds’ arena became one of the first permanent homes of the San Antonio Spurs.

Simultaneously, the U.S. Pavilion’s Confluence Theatre promised to meet a more practical and immediate need, namely as a replacement for the San Antonio U.S. Post Office and Courthouse that architects Paul Philippe Cret and Ralph Haywood Cameron had completed in 1937. The Beaux Arts–style courthouse, a New Deal project, had already replaced an obsolete courthouse, yet continual growth in the Judiciary’s caseload demanded an even larger third home. And the drum-shaped building that local architecture firm Marmon Mok had designed as HemisFair’s cinema presented an affordable solution to

the crowding. In 1975, crews ripped out 1,200 seats from the Confluence Theatre and renovated it to accommodate two district judges, a part-time magistrate, the clerk's office, and corresponding federal agencies. The facility was renamed the John H. Wood Jr. Federal Courthouse in 1979.

Adapting a temporary theater building into San Antonio's next federal courthouse was considered an awkward, if expedient, conversion even in 1972, considering how the partitioning of Confluence Theatre's cylindrical interior produced multiple oddly shaped and daylight-deprived rooms. Xavier Rodriguez, a judge of the United States District Court for the Western District of Texas since 2003, says that San Antonio's meteoric growth after 1975 only exacerbated the clumsiness of that fit. "In 1972, nobody including my predecessor thought that San Antonio would be the seventh largest city in the U.S. It was a sleepy little place," Judge Rodriguez says. "As workload increased [in concert with San Antonio's overall growth], we eventually spread to three different buildings," he adds, referring to the San Antonio Federal

Building and Adrian Spears Training Center adjacent to the Wood courthouse.

The same chamber of commerce that initiated HemisFair '68 agreed that the Confluence Theatre had outlived its reuse as a federal courthouse. "The number of federal employees has long since outgrown the space provided in the pavilion. There are currently seven judges working in the pavilion and a majority of employees are actually located in the adjacent Federal Building," the Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce executive committee said in a 2010 statement.

Had the John H. Wood Jr. Federal Courthouse accommodated all the people who serve the U.S. Courts and its supporting agencies, the converted theater still would not have kept pace with security demands. Among other examples, the courthouse did not include a controlled entry through which the U.S. Marshals Service could escort criminal defendants into the building to stand trial, known as a sally port. Of the Marshals assigned to the Wood courthouse, Judge Rodriguez recalls,



John H. Wood Jr. Federal Courthouse, the former Confluence Theatre

“They parked prisoners on city streets and walked them on sidewalks down into the back entry.” The courthouse interior, moreover, lacked the separate elevators and corridors that have become a judicial design standard: it was not unusual for judges as well as jurors to encounter criminal defendants within these spaces.

As unsafe circulation and other challenges at the Wood courthouse became increasingly apparent, the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), which owned the facility, was laying groundwork for a purpose-built structure that would serve the needs of a contemporary Judiciary. In 2010, the federal agency earned almost unanimous approval from city council to transfer the Wood courthouse to San Antonio in exchange for its police headquarters location. A year earlier GSA had chosen local architecture firm Lake|Flato to lead design of the fourth federal courthouse in San Antonio’s history. And in 2015, the U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure authorized funds for GSA to realize both the land swap and the state-of-the-art courthouse.

The San Antonio Police Headquarters was razed after the 2012 opening of the new City of San Antonio Public Safety Headquarters, which centralized the fire and police departments. That same year, the city council approved a master plan for redeveloping the HemisFair ’68 grounds as a mixed-use neighborhood, while more recently local officials have been contemplating new uses for the Confluence Theatre in earnest. GSA officially opened the new United States Courthouse in 2022, and the federal agency concurrently operates San Antonio’s New Deal-era courthouse. Located on Alamo Plaza, that building was listed to the National Register of Historic Places in 2000, renamed the Hipolito F. Garcia Federal Building and United States Courthouse in 2005, and became the first LEED Platinum-certified building in GSA’s inventory after a 2012 upgrade overseen by the St. Louis-based architecture firm Trivers. It is home to multiple entities including the United States Bankruptcy Court for the Western District of Texas.



The entry facades of the New Deal-era and contemporary courthouses engage in dialogue





Site Plan

ORGANIZING THE NEW COURTHOUSE PROGRAM

The Lake|Flato-designed United States Courthouse in San Antonio encompasses eight courtrooms, including a courtroom for special proceedings, as well as chambers for 13 judges, probation and pretrial spaces for the United States District Court, and workplaces for Federal Public Defender Services, the U.S. Marshals Service, and the Offices of the United States Attorneys. Discrete prisoner holding and circulation, which were so severely lacking from the converted Confluence Theatre, are fully internal to the new courthouse.

The building totals 245,000 square feet distributed over three stories that ring an atrium, which organizes the area into wings. In plan, the footprint of the United States Courthouse approximates a trapezoid in shape. Members of the public flow into the facility through the plan's tapered west side, passing between six heroic steel columns supporting an expanse of glass that cantilevers beyond the ground-floor pedestrian entry. This west elevation is flanked by brick-coursed Lueders limestone and appears to mirror the Beaux-Arts Hipolito F. Garcia Federal Building and

United States Courthouse, where six Ionic columns shield a recessed porch. Both vintage and contemporary gestures perform a similar function: whereas Paul Philippe Cret topped his sextet in an entablature that casts shade on the porch, Lake|Flato filtered daylight by mounting horizontal louvers to the glass and a metal brise-soleil at the new columns' peak.

Courthouse visitors proceed from the public entry to the atrium, a daylight-filled volume where newcomers can orient themselves to the interior plan. Potential jurors traverse this lobby space to a large interior stair that leads to a second-floor jury assembly area, whose exterior windows face San Pedro Creek to the east. The atrium hosts naturalization ceremonies, for which the interior stairway's landing functions as a stage. When not in active use, the jury assembly area is a lounge for employees, many of whom work in the courthouse's largely administrative south wing.

Courtrooms are situated in the north wing, which is also home to jury deliberation rooms and judges' and clerks' chambers.

Because these spaces enjoy street frontage, Lake|Flato approached the north wing's facade with the same care for formal composition and symbolic meaning as it treated the west elevation. Eight limestone pilasters, reflecting the number of courtrooms, alternate with window bays that represent the transparency of the federal judicial system, while clerestory windows allow daylight penetration into the courtrooms themselves. The brise-soleil that crowns the entry columns reappears on this elevation, stretching between the planes of rough-cut stone.

"Traditionally within our built environment, courthouses are very ordered buildings which have an intrinsic sense of purpose. They are bastions of permanence, and of truth and honesty," Lake|Flato principal David Lake says. The regular rhythm of solidity and lightness in the new United States Courthouse's north elevation follows in that judicial design tradition, drawing specific inspiration again from the imagery of the Garcia building: as the architect puts it, "You should look at the facade and say there's something serious

going on behind those bays of glass." The material palette of the new courthouse's two most visible elevations extends to its east and south faces.

Lake also notes that the building's generous setback from the street has precedent in historical judicial design. "In Texas, we have a particular tradition of county courthouses, in which these buildings sit in the middle of a broad park and anchor the civic precinct of the county seat," he says. "When we made our pitch to GSA, we said we wanted to reinforce San Antonio's Historic Civic District. One of the beauties of this project is its proximity to the Bexar County Courthouse, and GSA deserves accolades for negotiating for the site." In response, although the Lake|Flato design does not repeat the sandstone and green tile of the nearby county courthouse, it does allot a similarly significant amount of outdoor space to pedestrians.



The courthouse's north elevation, seen from the grounds of Casa Navarro





In some ways, justice is not dissimilar from how water emanated from San Pedro Creek to irrigate fields. Justice emanates from this building and flows out into the community.

David Lake
Architect







EXPRESSIONS OF LOCAL IDENTITY

“I wanted a building that would be reflective of San Antonio’s present and its past,” Judge Rodriguez remembers of the period leading to the new United States Courthouse’s design. Indeed, well before the completion of federal or county courthouses or even the 1845 annexation of Texas by the United States, San Antonio’s rich culture yielded unique forms in the built environment. Lake|Flato and its partners plumbed these physical expressions to arrive at appropriate architectural and landscape schemes for GSA.

Amplifying that directive, the United States Courthouse site has direct links to precolonial history. Archaeologists have found evidence of human habitation in San Antonio going back at least 10 millennia, and one locus of activity includes the spring-fed San Pedro Creek that glides past the new courthouse’s east elevation. Indigenous settlement along the creek coalesced into the Coahuiltecan-speaking Payaya people.

It was along San Pedro Creek, too, that a Spanish expedition led by Governor Domingo Terán de los Ríos established

camp in June 1691 and named the resting place after the Feast of Saint Anthony. When Governor Don Martín de Alarcón received orders to establish a presidio on the San Antonio River two and a half decades later, Fray Antonio Buenaventura y Olivares erected a corresponding mission “near the first spring, half a league from a high ground adjoining a small thicket of live oaks.” Settlers constructed temporary housing alongside San Pedro Creek, and they watered crops via a limestone-edged channel draining from its east bank.

This irrigation channel, known as an acequia and built with Payaya support, began flowing in 1719. It would ultimately become known as the Acequia Madre de Valero, as it grew into a 45-mile system serving residents well into the 19th century. By then, equally storied buildings were quickly vanishing from the landscape. One vestige of life along San Pedro Creek is the limestone-and-adobe residence of the statesman José Antonio Navarro, which was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2016; Casa Navarro faces the north elevation of the United States Courthouse.

GSA's new building also overlaps with El Camino Real which, beginning in the 16th century, Spanish colonists had adapted into a royal road from ancient Indigenous trails. Originally the corridor fostered movement of raw materials, people, and goods between Mexico City and territories in New Mexico. An additional branch was established between Mexico City and lands due north of the viceroyalty capital simultaneous to Governor Terán de los Ríos's 1691 expedition. And while this Texas corridor peeled off in many directions, the transportation network clustered in San Antonio and threaded through the United States Courthouse site.

Architect Lake explains that the courthouse's atrium engages in dialogue with El Camino Real: the large and naturally illuminated volume reflects the physical and symbolic volume of the road. Lake adds that the design team "tried to play down the grandeur of the atrium by introducing wood slats and surfaces" between acoustical plaster pilasters in its interior. In addition to combining materials to humanize the atrium, Lake|Flato

conceived a floor in strokes of green, white, and brown terrazzo that evoke San Pedro Creek and Acequia Madre de Valero. "It, too, breaks down the scale of the atrium, while the design tells the story of the role of water in our environment," Lake says of the pattern, adding, "In some ways, justice is not dissimilar from how water emanated from San Pedro Creek to irrigate fields. Justice emanates from this building and flows out into the community."

References to pre-annexation urban planning and architecture in San Antonio are strongly legible from the grounds of the United States Courthouse. The building facades and brise-soleils echo the stonework and porches of San Antonio's historic acequias and Casa Navarro, respectively, while the 12 brick courses that punctuate the Lueders limestone symbolize the membership of a jury.

For the adjacent outdoor spaces, "we were attempting to create a shaded, universal entry to the front of the building with a sloped plaza and stepping, and the streetscapes included acequias to filter

rainwater prior to entering San Pedro Creek,” says Christine E. Ten Eyck, whose Austin, Texas–based Ten Eyck Landscape Architects had teamed with Lake|Flato for the courthouse commission. The composition of native plantings and bioswales integrates seamlessly with the shoreline of San Pedro Creek itself, which is steadily undergoing restoration by Bexar County, the San Antonio River Authority, and the City of San Antonio. Upon completion of this San Pedro Creek Culture Park, the environmentally sensitive infrastructure will span 2.2 miles and generate \$1.5 billion in economic activity.

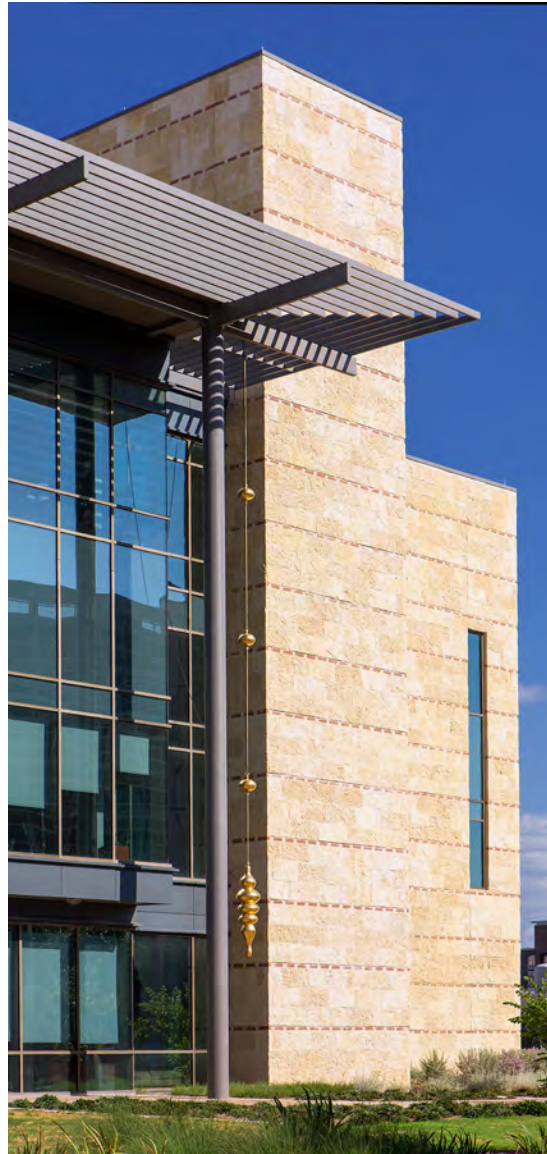
Lake|Flato was selected to design the United States Courthouse in San Antonio through GSA’s Design Excellence Program, leading a team that included Ten Eyck Landscape Architects and Muñoz & Company (now known as Alta Architects). GSA executed the courthouse using design-build delivery, with Brasfield & Gorrie at the helm. Alta produced documents to bridge the process’ two chapters, and the company served as a consultant through construction.

Flexing to local context extended to practical concerns. The courthouse atrium is proportionate to the large and celebratory naturalization ceremonies that the Judiciary conducts in San Antonio. The courtroom interiors are particularly responsive to the caseload of the United States District Court for the Western District of Texas, too. Because the district regularly handles multi-defendant drug cases, Lake|Flato increased the size of those rooms’ defendant and spectator areas in turn. “Judge Rodriguez was keen on courtrooms that could address our San Antonio culture, and he dreamed up ways to welcome people who wouldn’t ordinarily come into the courthouse,” Lake explains.

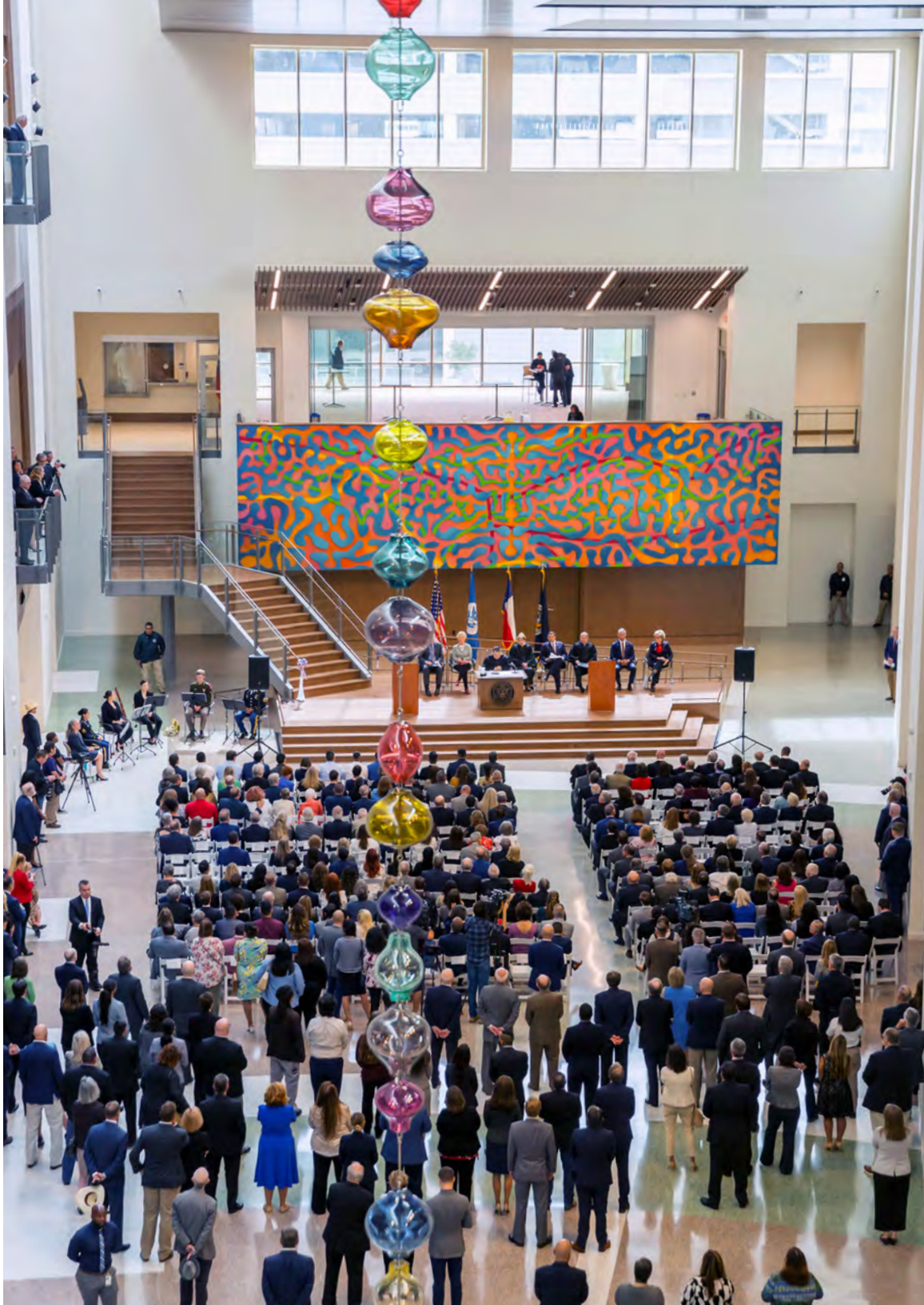
“One size does not fit all,” Judge Rodriguez agrees of the interiors and of the courthouse overall: “I understand that we want these buildings to project a certain image, but can one image work in all cities? Greco-Roman styles can be off-putting to people, too, so there’s got to be a way to reflect solemnity, the rule of law, discipline, and orderliness in modern structures. This building has gravitas and warmth.”

By striving for more than its limited budget would seem to allow, it provides a snapshot, along with the courthouses that came before it, of a people's evolving views of its government.

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ART IN ARCHITECTURE

Not long after Thomas Glassford graduated from the University of Texas at Austin in 1988, the Laredo, Texas–born artist opened a practice in Mexico City that he runs to this day. Asked of his choice to move to Mexico’s capital city, he recalled to a reporter, “I’m much more interested in broadening my understanding culturally... having grown up on the border.” The same thinking that drove Jerome K. Harris, in 1959, to propose that San Antonio host a “Hemis-Fair” motivated Glassford’s choice of professional home decades later.

Since establishing his studio in the early 1990s, Glassford has stacked everyday materials, ranging from found objects to manufactured products, in multiples to create large-scale sculpture. Commentators have described these installations as homages to Minimalism or as abstract columns and abacuses. The artist also repeats a module on surfaces, to evoke Op Art paintings of the 1960s.

The new United States Courthouse showcases Glassford’s vision in both two and three dimensions, through GSA’s Art

in Architecture Program. The program commissions sculpture, paintings, and installations for GSA’s new construction and major modernization projects, using one half of one percent of a facility’s estimated construction cost as funds for public art. Tapped for the San Antonio courthouse, Glassford produced two Art in Architecture pieces. The sculpture *Dueling Pendants* is a pair of forms that, in a departure from Glassford’s stacks, drop from the building: one is fabricated from gilded bronze and mounts to the exterior roofline near the courthouse’s public entrance; the other comprises a string of glass elements hovering within the atrium. Together, they represent the scales of justice.

The second Glassford artwork further activates the courthouse atrium. Installed just beneath the jury assembly room, the mural *Riparian Nexus* is an abstraction of San Antonio’s waterways and roads. Seen in tandem with *Dueling Pendants*, Glassford reminds viewers that a society depends equally on natural resources, the flow of commerce, and equitable access to justice to sustain itself over generations.









THE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION TEAM

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U.S. General Services Administration
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Tenant

United States District Court for the Western District of Texas
United States Attorney's Office for the Western District of Texas
United States Marshals Service
United States Courts Probation and Pretrial Services System
Federal Public Defender Services

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Phoenix, Arizona

Electrical Subcontractors

Big State Electric
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Beckwith Electronic Engineering
Company
San Antonio, Texas

Glazing Subcontractor

Sharp Glass
San Antonio, Texas

Masonry

Shadrock & Williams
Helotes, Texas

Architectural Millwork

Beaubois
Saint-Georges, Quebec, Canada

Door and Security Hardware

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Signage

Fravert Services
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Design Excellence National Peers

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Art in Architecture/Fine Arts National Peers

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**U.S. GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
AND THE DESIGN EXCELLENCE PROGRAM**

Public buildings are part of a nation's legacy. They are symbolic of what government is about, not just places where public business is conducted.

Since its establishment in 1949, the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) has been responsible for creating federal civilian workplaces. The agency provides all the products and services necessary to make these environments healthy and productive for employees and cost-effective for American taxpayers. As a builder for the United States government and steward of many of our nation's most valued architectural treasures, GSA is committed to preserving and adding to America's architectural and artistic legacy as it executes its mission.

GSA established the Design Excellence Program in 1994 to better achieve the mandates of public architecture. Under this program administered by the Office of Architecture and Engineering, GSA has engaged many of the finest designers, planners, and other creative professionals in America to conceive the federal landmarks of the future. Through these collaborations, GSA is implementing the goals of the 1962 Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture: producing facilities that reflect

the dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the federal government, emphasizing designs that embody the most compelling contemporary architectural thought; avoiding an official style; and incorporating the work of living American artists in public buildings. In this effort, each building is to be both an individual expression of design excellence and part of a larger body of work representing the best that America's designers and artists can leave to later generations.

To find talent most suited to this vision, the Design Excellence Program has simplified the way GSA selects architects and engineers for new construction and major renovation projects, enhancing opportunities for emerging, small, disadvantaged, and women-owned businesses. The program recognizes and celebrates the innovation and diversity of the American people.

The Design Excellence Program is the recipient of a 2003 National Design Award from the Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, and of the 2004 Keystone Award from the American Architectural Foundation.



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