

The Courthouse Entrance: Collision of Function and Symbol

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SUMMARY

Functional requirements have changed the design of courthouse entrances: Some elements established as symbols of justice architecture are no longer appropriate archetypes. New facilities must be designed to encourage egalitarian justice while still presenting an image of authority. Architects must consider both function and symbolism, creating secure facilities that represent democracy and openness.

COURTHOUSE DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

How do architects reconcile security, accessibility, and directional clarity, yet still create an aesthetically pleasing entrance? Careful thought at the beginning stages of design will help the architect create cost-effective, functional, and well-designed solutions. A courthouse entrance must be safe, secure, visibly indicate equal access to all, and provide clear visual elements that help visitors locate their destination without asking for assistance.

The requirements for courthouse design that have changed most in the past decade result from new thinking in the fields of accessibility and security, as well as changes in the mission served by most courthouses. Increased importance is now placed on family court services, self-help (pro per), and family law facilitators and mediators. Courthouse users are more likely to be unfamiliar with the court system and building, and less likely to be a regular visitor (i.e., an attorney or staff member). Therefore, a modern courthouse entrance must be more open and user-focused.

Access

Ease of access is an integral component of planning and designing civic buildings. As an essential element of the justice system, a courthouse must be accessible to the public, denoting symbolic “justice for all.” Integrating the tenets of universal design early in the design process supports the creation of innovative, well-designed spaces that allow all visitors to approach and use the building in the same manner.

Universal accessibility at a courthouse entrance requires a zero-step entry for visitors and staff, unlike the traditional courthouse image with a monumental multi-step formal entry. Architectural messages need not be discarded, but must be modified to address these concerns.

The entry into the San Francisco Civic Center Courthouse is an example of a successful urban public lobby designed for universal access. As seen in the accompanying image, the public entrance is easily accessible at the corner, and level changes take place via a centrally placed elevator bank easily visible after passing through the security screening stations.



Entrance to the San Francisco Civic Center Courthouse

Security

Security threats can occur anywhere in a courthouse; therefore, architects must balance security and aesthetics to prevent a bunker feeling. Ideally, an architect wants to create hospitable, user-friendly, secure access. Integrating security solutions into the design of a building is a more effective

solution for courthouse security than using staff as security control.

According to the National Center for State Courts, “the main danger to a court facility is not a terrorist attack but is instead violent or assaultive behavior directed against staff, judicial officers, the public, or detainees.” To minimize threats and reduce operational requirements,

- Isolate the lobby outside the main structure in case of blast.
- Provide one entrance point for public and staff.
- Design the standard two (for civil) or three (for criminal) layers of circulation.

The Southwest Justice Center in Temecula, Calif., successfully demonstrates an entrance lobby that separates security functions from the main part of the building. Access to the public lobby is controlled by security screening staff adjacent to the exterior plaza.



Entrance to the Southwest Justice Center, Temecula, Calif.

Crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) is a prevention strategy for deterring criminal behavior. Three basic CPTED strategies help deter access to a crime target and create the perception of risk to a perpetrator:

- **Natural and constructed surveillance.** Use placement of physical features, activities, and people to maximize visibility and prevent the opportunity for crime. Supplement these efforts with constructed surveillance concentrated at building access points.
- **Natural and constructed access control.** Provide visual focus on public entries, and

direct visitors to them along pathways with plantings and physical features.

- **Territoriality.** Use physical features such as fencing, pavement treatments, signage, and landscaping to express ownership and protect designated space. The design will cause intruders to stand out, and people will be more likely to challenge intruders or report suspicious activity.

CPTED strategies, if applied early in the design process, allow designers to modify customary features and configurations to enhance the security of a facility.

Wayfinding

Easy to understand wayfinding cues with clear paths of travel to the public entrance and throughout the courthouse augment building accessibility and security. Ways to ensure effective wayfinding include designing the public lobby as a focal point for the entire facility, locating the entries of high-volume public use spaces so they can be seen directly from the public entry lobby, and providing visual clues for direction immediately inside the entrance. Where visitors with disabilities must diverge from the route of the general public (e.g., at stairs), the resumption of the path must be clear and not require backtracking.

The large entry and security screening lobby of the Southwest Justice Center in Temecula, Calif., is a successful example of the use of wayfinding features. This public lobby connects to a central circulation node with visual cues that direct visitors to the different courthouse functions.



Public lobby and security screening area inside the Southwest Justice Center, Temecula, Calif.

According to the Advisory Committee for Courthouse Access for Adapted in “[Justice for All: Designing Accessible Courthouses](#)”, “Effective wayfinding results from programming, architecture,

environmental graphic, and signage forms. In large, complicated facilities like courthouses, potential elements of an effective wayfinding system include grouping functional areas, providing architectural elements that can serve as points of reference for cues (“turn left at the clock tower”), employing distinctive finishes in different functional areas, embedding graphics in the flooring, and using a comprehensive signage system. Some of these elements may be very obvious in the building’s design, while others may be more subtle finish selections. Multi-sensory signage, including visual, aural, and tactile elements, can provide additional wayfinding cues.”

As a wayfinding technique, architects typically rely on directional signage, which may be clear and concise but is usually not effective for people with vision impairments. Neither can graphics rectify awkward planning decisions. Clearly articulated architectural solutions give all visitors the ability to intuitively understand the facility layout.

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTOR

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AAJ is the eNewsletter for the Academy of Architecture for Justice Knowledge Community.

RESOURCES

For More Information on This Topic

See also “Programming” by, Edith Cherry, FAIA, ASLA, in *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 14th edition, Chapter 12, page 507. *The Handbook* can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by sending an e-mail to bookstore@aia.org.



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Key Terms

- Design
- Security
- Public facilities
- Courthouses

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