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Occupants' Perception of Openness in Federal Courthouses

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ABSTRACT:

In a previous study the authors attempted to identify the underlying dimensions of openness in federal courthouse architecture. The study was significant because openness became a key political ideology to be expressed in federal architecture in the late 20th Century, and considerations arising out of radical changes in security scenarios were perceived as conflicting with the desire for openness. Using an expressive lens, the previous study focused on identifying clients' interpretations of the concept. Findings of the study suggested that openness has six underlying interpretations – accessibility, transparency, exposure, organizational clarity, illumination and inclusiveness. The authors had also suggested a four-dimensional theoretical framework – physical, social, cognitive, and symbolic - within which the six interpretations are situated. Using a behavioral lens, this paper reports the findings of a follow-up study that focused on the building occupants' response to clients' interpretations, representing a key conduit between clients' intention and public response. 108 courthouse occupants, from 3 federal courthouses, completed a questionnaire survey during 2004 - 2005. Data suggests that occupants conceive openness mainly in terms of transparency and exposure. Further, statistical analyses also suggest that openness may be a two-dimensional construct, from the occupants' viewpoint, in contrast to the four-dimensional framework hypothesized previously. Findings highlight subsets of interpretations that constitute occupants' perception of openness, articulating an important schema in the link between clients' intentions and public perception. The study creates the necessary foundation for a deeper understanding of and solutions to the security-openness conflict.

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