



OCCUPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF OPENNESS IN FEDERAL COURTHOUSES

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DESIGN ISSUE

How do courthouse occupants and the general public perceive the architectural design of new generation federal courthouses? Does the federal government's design intention to achieve "openness", infused in the new generation courthouses, translate to actual perception of openness by the audience – the courthouse occupants and the general public? Which attributes of courthouse architecture actually convey openness?

BACKGROUND

Since the early 1990s, the US General Services Administration (GSA) and the Administrative Office of the US Courts have embarked upon a multi-billion dollar courthouse construction program to provide improved federal courthouse facilities across the country. This program, the largest in US history since the WPA era, witnessed a radical change in courthouse architectural style, with varying interpretations and translations of the concept of "openness" by a range of mostly quite well-known architects (the new courthouses formed a cornerstone of GSA's Design Excellence program).

In a previous study (see summary titled "Rethinking Openness: Courthouses in the United States"), the authors identified six "domains of interpretation" of openness as understood by clients (judges and designers); the six were: accessibility, transparency, exposure, organizational clarity, illumination, and inclusiveness. Further, the implications of these categories of openness were seen to overlap, which led the authors to propose a preliminary framework of openness when referring to US courthouses, with four interrelated dimensions: (1) physical, (2) symbolic, (3) social, and (4) cognitive.

As a sequel to the first study, this study examined the courthouse occupants' response to physical design translations of "openness". It also empirically tested the four-dimensional framework offered by the authors of the first study.

RESEARCH METHOD

A survey-based methodology was adopted to collect empirical data from courthouse occupants at three federal courthouses located in three different states. The courthouses were built between 2001 and 2003, and located in Montgomery, Alabama; Gulfport, Mississippi; and Youngstown, Ohio. The



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courthouse attributes varied in significant ways – in built-up area (49,282 – 291,000 sq. ft.), in number of courtrooms (1 – 14), and in height (3 – 8 stories). They also differed in presumed openness attributes such as distance from the curb, amount of exterior glazing, architectural style, degree of entry articulation, and so forth. The final sample of three courthouses was a result of opportunity sampling (courthouses voluntarily agreeing to participate were included), and limitation of funds to cover the study expenses.

The survey contained questions on each of the six domains of openness identified in the first study and the questions were worded to closely reflect the intentions of the designers. For instance one question for accessibility was: “Your walk to this building entry from sidewalks and/or car parking is (Very unappealing – Very inviting)”. Similarly, a question on transparency was: “This building suggests to you that the activities carried out in it are (Very secretive – Very transparent). Between late 2004 and early 2005, the researchers spent two days at each site administering the survey. They received 110 responses in all, from court employees, contract employees, lawyers, and judges. Data were analyzed using the statistical techniques of principal components analysis and multivariate regression analysis.

FINDINGS

In assessing the perception of openness from the building occupants' points of view, analyses demonstrated that only transparency and exposure had a significant association with overall perception of openness. To a lesser degree, building occupants also associated illumination and inclusiveness with openness.

In assessing the theoretical framework, the authors discovered that the following findings deviated from the proposition in the first study:

1. Exposure, which was originally hypothesized to be associated with the dimensions of physical, symbolic, and social openness, was found to be an entirely cognitive dimension.
2. Illumination, which was seen to be related to clarity and justice (a symbolic dimension), was also found to be linked with the cognitive dimension.
3. Organizational clarity, which in the previous study was hypothesized to be a cognitive dimension of openness, was found to be associated with all four dimensions of the framework.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN PRACTICE

For design teams embarking on a new or renovation courthouse project:

- Consider reviewing the implications section of the summary titled “Rethinking Openness: Courthouses in the United States”, as it outlines the palette of design options to infuse openness in federal courthouse architecture.



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- The current study identified the more powerful areas of design translation. Thus, when reviewing design options, consider enhancing transparency and exposure for the best return on investment, followed by illumination and inclusiveness.
- In terms of design decisions, the following represent some of the options available within the domains of transparency and exposure (extracted from summary titled “Rethinking Openness: Courthouses in the United States”):
 - ✓ Large areas of exterior glazing to visually connect interior and exterior.
 - ✓ Strategic visual links from interior spaces to key local landmarks.
 - ✓ View of important interior public spaces from the streets and sidewalks.
 - ✓ Locating the courthouse on heavy-traffic corridors.
 - ✓ Locating the courthouse on a site visible from one or more major highway/s.
 - ✓ Optimize engagement with pedestrian and vehicular traffic; enhance visibility of the courthouse.
- The following represent some of the options available within the domains of illumination and inclusiveness (extracted from summary titled “Rethinking Openness: Courthouses in the United States”):
 - ✓ Well lighted interior environment; natural light in public access areas.
 - ✓ Incorporate non-courthouse functions, if feasible, to attract general public into the courthouse exterior and interior spaces.

LIMITATIONS

The small size of the courthouse sample limits generalizability of the findings. This study examined courthouse occupants only; responses to openness design strategies from the general public were not included. Finally, 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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