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WOMEN IN ARCHITECTURE NOW

U.S. Courthouse | Austin, Texas | Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects

POETIC JUSTICE



An innovative pinwheel plan brings daylight into a rugged cubic building that strengthens the public realm's imprint in a historic part of the Texas capital.

BY CLIFFORD A. PEARSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM HURSLEY

UNLESS YOU'RE a lawyer, you probably don't look forward to spending time in courthouses, since most of us associate them with jury duty or maybe lawsuits. Courthouses of the past captured our attention with their handsome expressions of judicial authority and civic pride. But in recent years, security concerns have turned many of these buildings into glorified bunkers. Americans today have an uneasy relationship with government; we want our public institutions to instill respect and project strength, but we don't want them to cost much or be too powerful. In their design for the new U.S. Courthouse in Austin, Texas, the Atlanta-based architects Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam wrestled with these conflicting notions, finding resolution in a building that's muscular in its



massing and materials but engaging in its use of daylight and transparency.

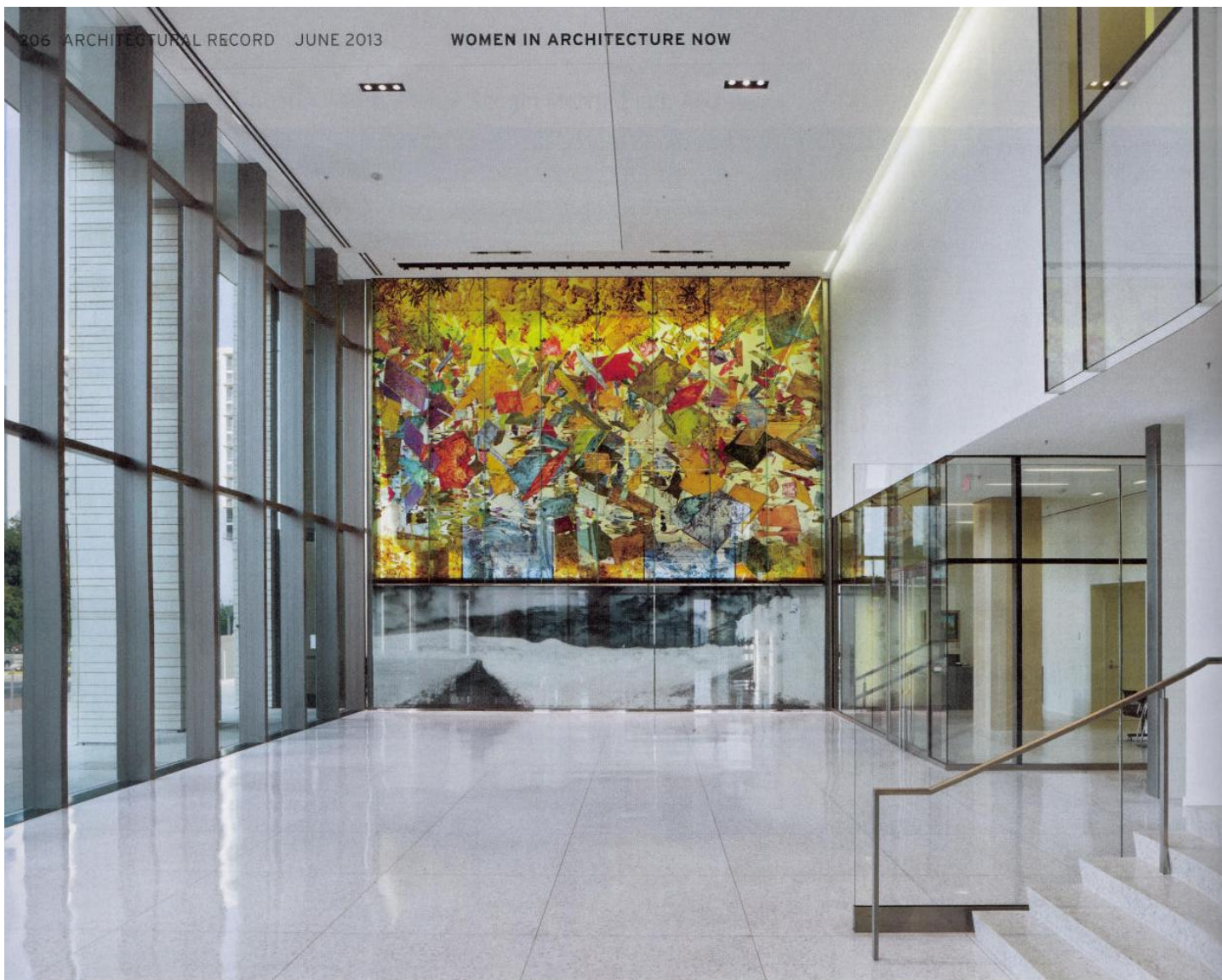
The 252,000-square-foot, \$102.6 million courthouse replaces a smaller one a few blocks north, which was designed by local architect Charles H. Page and New York architect Kenneth Franzheim and opened in 1936. Like its predecessor, the new courthouse was built during a severe economic downturn, thanks to stimulus spending. Its full-block site, west of Republic Square Park, one of the city's three remaining downtown historic squares, places it strategically near Antoine Predock's City Hall (2004), Andersson-Wise's 37-story W Hotel and Residences (2010), and all the honky-tonk bars on West Sixth Street.

To connect the courthouse and Republic Square, the architects closed a city street that runs between them and turned it into a plaza landscaped with hardy sycamore trees and wood benches. "We wanted the building to be of its place, of Austin," says Elam, "so its relationship with Republic Square was critical." Now a farmers' market that takes place in the square every Saturday spills onto the plaza, right up to the wide courthouse steps.

Scogin and Elam had to pack a lot of program—eight courtrooms and accompanying jury-deliberation spaces, judges' chambers, offices, attorney/witness conference rooms, a jury-assembly room, and various holding spaces for defendants—onto a fairly tight site. So they envisioned the building as a cubic

TEXAS SWAGGER Scogin says he and Elam wanted the building to feel bigger than it is so it would have a presence in the burgeoning city (above). With that in mind, they used a rugged palette of limestone, stainless steel, and black, preweathered zinc. A new plaza (opposite) connects the courthouse and its wide stairs to Republic Square Park (just out of view on the right of photo).





A conversation with: **Merrill Elam and Mack Scogin**



"Merrill was a renegade," says Mack Scogin about his wife and business partner. "She didn't show up on time, and she didn't follow the rules." He would know. The two have worked together since 1968, first at Heery and Heery and then at their own firm. Both acknowledge their ex-boss George Heery for allowing Elam's talent to shine. Scogin and Elam are jointly concerned with each project, with one taking the lead as principal in charge, and each as co-lead designer. "But sometimes all that switches around as the project progresses," says Elam. "There's no hierarchy." It's a collaboration that works, says Scogin, because they don't try to find common ground, but to maintain their individuality, together. "You have to be continuously fascinated by the other person's ideas," he says.

**GROUND FLOOR**

A large glass artwork by Clifford Ross separates the main lobby (opposite) from the jury-assembly room (above). Its colorful upper portion brings together pieces of a photograph of a Colorado mountain; the lower part is a pair of pivoting glass doors imprinted with a photo of a Texas landscape. Daylight helps animate the elevator lobby (above right).

structure practically bursting at the seams. The largest courtroom—the only one on the ground floor—pushes out 2 feet on one side, while roof canopies jut out at two corners to cover terraces carved from the building mass. Courtrooms are expressed on the outside with vertical windows and corner glazing. The overall effect is that of an enormous Rubik's cube—a stately, orthogonal mass subverted by smaller components that look as if they might have been rotated from their original positions.

Scogin and Elam clad the courthouse in the same local limestone seen on many nearby public buildings to tie it to its context, but applied the material in a very different way. Instead of turning the rough face out, they used the smooth side as the facade. To add texture to the exterior, they made a subtle quilt of the stone—varying the dimensions of the pieces, sloping some out from the vertical and others in.

During the design process, the architects toured a number of courthouses with U.S. Magistrate Judge Andrew Austin and other members of the project's building committee. They noticed that most of these buildings have convoluted hallways, in part because courthouses must have three

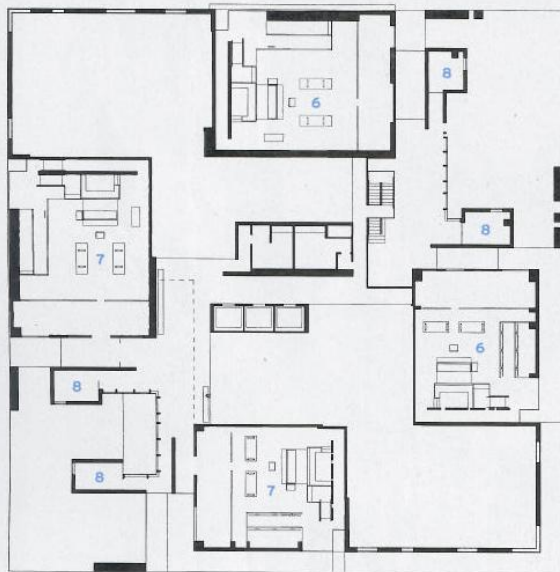


distinct circulation systems: one for the public, one for court staff (restricted), and one for prisoners and government marshals (secure). Many buildings tucked courtrooms inside large floor plates, away from windows. "At the old courthouse here in Austin, the courtrooms had daylight and views outside," says Judge Austin. "All of the judges wanted to keep that in the new building."

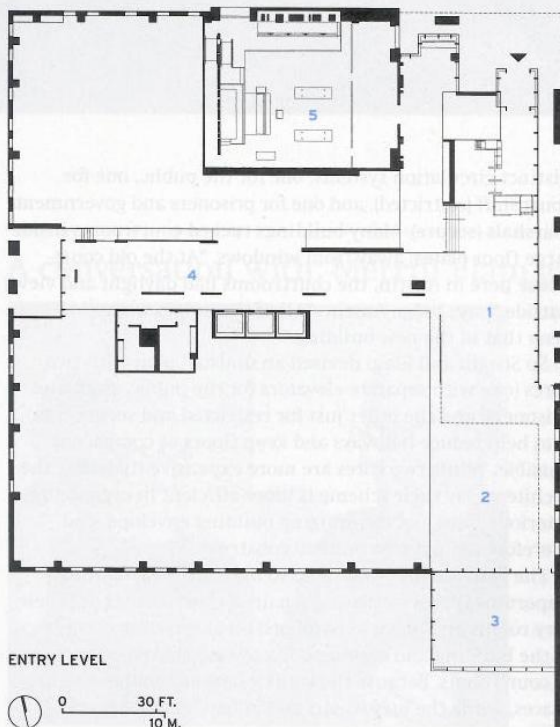
So Scogin and Elam devised an unusual plan with two cores (one with separate elevators for the public, staff, and prisoners, and the other just for restricted and secure use) that help reduce hallways and keep floors as compact as possible. While two cores are more expensive than one, the architects say their scheme is more efficient in organizing interior spaces and minimizing building envelope, and therefore did not cost more to construct.

The plan also allowed them to maximize daylight in important spaces by placing a pair of courtrooms (and their jury rooms and judges' chambers) on alternating corners of the building and carving out a terrace shared by each pair of courtrooms. Because the courtrooms are double-height spaces, while the jury rooms and judges' chambers are

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|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 LOBBY | 6 COURTROOM (SIXTH FLOOR) |
| 2 JURY ASSEMBLY | 7 COURTROOM (SEVENTH FLOOR) |
| 3 PATIO | 8 ATTORNEY/WITNESS CONFERENCE |
| 4 ATRIUM | |
| 5 SPECIAL-PROCEEDINGS COURTROOM | |



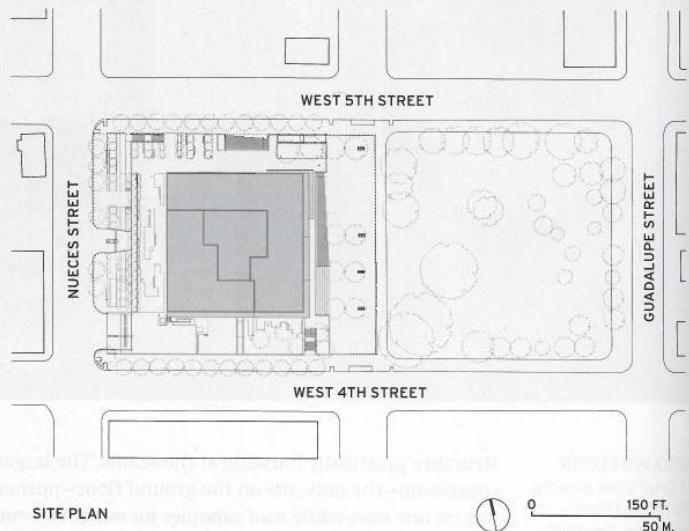
COMPOSITE PLAN - FLOORS 6 AND 7



single-height, the architects rotated their placement on the different corners and inserted a wood-clad interior stair to connect each pair of floors. For example, on the sixth floor, the two courtrooms bookend the northeast corner, while on the seventh they sit on the southwest corner. "Bringing in daylight drove everything we did," says Scogin. "The trick was to create a pinwheel plan around a double core. That allowed us to provide natural light to all of the courtrooms, and also the jury rooms and offices."

The building stands on a one-story podium, which allows parking to be tucked underneath and provides the blastproof walls required by current security mandates. Unfortunately, the long walls on its three street sides and the wide steps on Republic Square undermine the goal of engaging with the city. Once you walk up those steps, though, you're greeted by a double-height lobby with a long glazed wall overlooking the square and a four-story atrium that houses the elevators and helps distribute daylight deep inside the building.

A product of the General Services Administration's Design Excellence program, the U.S. Courthouse in Austin shows what can happen when top-tier architects work on public projects. The result here is a building that may not be warm and fuzzy, but asserts a rugged sense of civic pride that seems just right for Texas. ■



credits

ARCHITECT: Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects – Mack Scogin, principal in charge; Merrill Elam, collaborating principal; John Trefry, David Yocum, Carrie Hunsicker, project managers

ENGINEERS: PageSoutherlandPage (m/e/p/fp, civil); Architectural Engineers Collaborative (structural)

CONSULTANTS: Hargreaves Associates (landscape); Lam Partners (lighting); Shen Milsom & Wilke (acoustical)

CLIENT: General Services Administration

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: White Construction

SIZE: 252,420 square feet

COST: \$102.6 million

COMPLETION DATE: November 2012

SOURCES

STAINLESS STEEL PANELS: Rimex Metals

ZINC PANELS: VMZINC

GLAZING: Harmon

ENTRY DOORS: Ellison

TERRAZZO FLOORING: National Terrazzo

GLASS FIRING AND LAMINATION

FOR LOBBY ARTWORK: Steindl Glas



ORDER IN THE COURT Internal stairs (top and right) face outdoor terraces and connect double-height courtrooms with single-story spaces for jury deliberation and judges' offices. In each courtroom, the architects brought daylight in from two sides and paneled walls with pecan veneer (above). In most cases, they were able to extend some windows above the ceiling height to bring in extra light.