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## Excellence Overruled

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THE FACE OF FEDERAL ARCHITECTURE was certainly revamped under the auspices of the General Services Administration's Design Excellence Program inaugurated in 1994 under the leadership of Ed Feiner, FAIA. Without question, the GSA's revised protocol for the design of federal facilities represented a radical departure from the concrete bunkers and sterile buildings developed during Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society domestic programs era. Buildings that have resulted from the Design Excellence Program are often notable for being visually lightweight and refreshingly transparent. With but a few exceptions, the program can be declared a success. Sadly, the new Albert Armendariz, Sr. Federal Courthouse in El Paso is one of those that have fallen short.

Antoine Predock Architect, teamed with BPLW Architects & Engineers as architect of record, was commissioned to design the courthouse following the three-stage Design Excellence selection process. (During the project, BPLW was purchased by ASCG, which later became WH Pacific.)

Predock's highly poetic vision for the project was emblematic of his design approach. His concept drew its cues from El Paso's geographic location as the gateway from south to north across the Rio Grande and the river's carved path through the mountains from east to west. The original design, in like manner, metaphorically incorporated a "pass" through the building. Predock also proposed a grand urban gesture by including a *zocalo* (plaza) echoing El Paso's Hispanic heritage, a much needed public space to anchor the eastern end of the downtown district. It featured a secured, shaded court loosely edged on two sides by shallow reflecting pools suggestive of the essential value of water in this desert region.

Predock deliberately positioned programmatic components to accentuate the gateway concept, as well as to highlight specific symbolism. A case in point is the designation of the Circuit Library as a bridge between the Special Proceedings Courtroom/Chambers and the main body of the courthouse. The highly visible, glazed connector was meant to reveal to the public the historical record of written law.

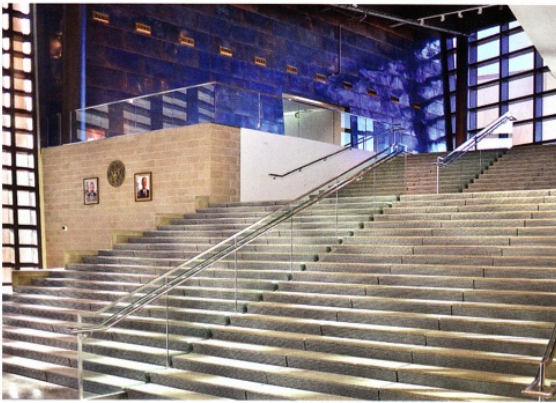
Entrance into the courthouse complex was to be gained through a delicately articulated, louvered glass enclosure that housed the security checkpoint and led to the monumental steps up to the *piano nobile* lobby.

(preceding spread) To mediate solar gain on the western face of the new courthouse, vertical slits refract sunlight within the stair tower. The landscape architect, Morrow Reardon Wilkinson Miller of Albuquerque, randomly placed honey mesquite and southern live oak over Bermuda grass in the entry plaza.

(this spread, clockwise from top right) Sky, a digital LED mural by artist Leo Villareal hangs in the public space. Fritted glass and a metal grid at the entry lobby mediate the intense sunshine of El Paso. In the courtrooms, natural light is filtered through translucent wall panels. A rendering from Antoine Predock Architect shows a glazed connector that would have housed the Circuit Library. Among the changes to the original design was the omission of the elevated, glass-enclosed bridge intended to connect the copper-clad courtroom and the main building.







Arrival at this platform would afford panoramic views of the nearby Sierra Juarez Mountains, the downtown skyline, and the peak of Mount Franklin. The mass of the federal facility was to be divided into two pieces, one clad in copper – a deferential nod to the city’s copper smelting heritage – and the other in Texas limestone, joined together by the glazed entrance enclosure. Predock also called for strategically carved sections to display the inner body of the courts as if chiseled out of the large limestone mass to show the building’s glowing copper core.

Unfortunately, despite the design team’s arduous efforts, the programmatic demands inherent with the project scope ultimately overshadowed the courthouse’s architectural design. From the onset, the team realized the incongruence of the project scope vis-à-vis the \$42 million budget. Nevertheless, GSA officials remained undeniably tasked with delivering a project to a client desperately in need of expanded facilities to manage a burgeoning case load. In response to this glaring budget-scope inconsistency, the budget was increased to \$48 million. However, the design team still deemed this amount insufficient, with Predock and BPLW pointing to post-9/11 anti-terrorism design measures – such as state-of-the-art blast mitigation and strategies for progressive building collapse – coupled with a stringent (68 percent) efficiency ratio in the building layout. Those requirements, the design team argued, accounted for at least 15 percent of the building’s cost. This concerted effort garnered another \$4 million, thus raising the budget to approximately \$52 million. Still, in the architects’ estimation, the budget remained far short of what would be required to build the complex. The pressure to close the gap eventually frayed the relationship between the two architectural firms.

Regardless of the rift, Predock was reporting to GSA officials that he remained committed to seeing the project through without compromising his finely tuned concept. Meanwhile, the situation was further complicated by a volatile market for copper and steel, a critical factor in the first construction bid coming in at roughly \$70 million. Swedish firm Skanska, the project’s construction manager-at-risk, initially secured that bid but later withdrew from the job for reasons that are not entirely clear. Caddell Construction Company then stepped in and instigated a wide-