

# Forms and Materials Do Mean and Move Us

A Review of Eugene's New Federal Courthouse

by Jerry Diethelm 1-12-07

One of my neighbors said that it looks as though Albert Speer could have designed it and I hoped that meant he disliked it. Another said it reminded him of an Oldenburg stainless steel kitchen appliance, referring to the contemporary sculptor that changes our perspective of ordinary things by making them super size. The venting that strong art evokes can be both insightful and wickedly fun.

There seems to be some agreement though that the new stainless steel, metallic justice center feels a bit too grey and adds a lonely, isolated lump of coolth to the riverfront. One also hears unspoken questions about the meaning of federal justice in these responses. Is justice meant to seem cold and mechanical as well as blind? It's true that grey concrete and gray metal in this climate have their warm moments in the sunlight, but neither adds much cheer on those days of drear.



Usually when I'm asked, "So, what do you think of our new courthouse?" I respond with, "Have you been inside?" And too often the answer is no. My point is that the building, any building, also needs to be experienced from within. Here I think the rewards are great.

Once through the security kidney, the central organizing public space is cavernous, curvaceous and full of natural light, a welcome counterpoint to the otherwise pervasive idiom of glass and steel and black and white. An elevator rises through this tent-like shaft connecting all five floors and points the way to the jury rooms above. At the main entry level, the jury assembly room destination lies comfortably straight ahead.

Off to the side are the entrances into the glass-enclosed floors of office space that make up the bulk of the building. This layered sandwich of glass and steel modernism glows like a large lantern at night as one comes into the downtown over the Ferry St. Bridge. On my tour I asked one of the new office dwellers how he liked it— a sampling of one - and he said that it was a much lighter, brighter and more cheerful place to work by far than the other building.

The expression of the courtrooms and judicial offices on the fourth and fifth floors give the building its distinctive skyline, a tri-pod like configuration architect Tom Mayne likened to the Three Sisters. There's seems very little real meaning other than threeness to extract from this metaphor. It reminds me of a colleague in school whom we all remember famously as having said: "I took the roundness from the moon."

Inside, the 4th floor public corridor that connects to the courtrooms through inviting plate glass double doors curves around an inaccessible roof deck that could offer every day access to outside air, potted plants, and a place to sit and wait to ponder the biggies such as whether all salmon are created equal. People with standing it appears are to be left standing.

The award winning courtroom spaces themselves feel somewhat smaller than I'd expected. A light beam overhead splits their main space in two and interrupts the overall sense of wholeness of the room. Sticking out as it does, I predict that this over-designed element will end up annoying most users over time. Not including the jury space under its main roof, which is nestled like an opera box off to one side, also contributes to the room's feeling of over segmentation. A more sensuous modern architect like, say, Alvar Aalto would have gathered the jury space, lost the fat beam and made the place feel larger, more continuous and robust.

The natural light and appointments in the room, however, are really wonderful as is the hardwood banding, which adds a warm patterned ambiance to the courtroom experience. The banding both inside and out is one of



the building's most impressive and distinctive features. To the architect's critical eye the courtrooms may not be perfect, but they make their county counterparts seem dingy and fiftyish-old in comparison.



The third leg of the inside-outside conversation about buildings is of course the courthouse's river terrace habitat. This is a very big building, squeezed in between major arterials and the Union Pacific railroad right-of-way, that wouldn't have fit along 5th Avenue. It completely changes the scale and grain of the former Cannery – Millrace District site and makes the little Arby's and IHOPs of Broadway look like doll-houses with red and blue roofs. It's a big rock in an urban pond with many needed ripples yet to come.

Looking down from Judge Hogan's office, the way to the river is obvious. A large portal under 6th Ave. and the UP tracks just east of its Ferry St. connection would provide a gorgeous gorge and a sweet swale to the riverfront. Compare this to the ravine just east of the Old Pole Yard where the Millrace now returns. It doesn't just return to the river. It brings the riverfront open space back to the river terrace above. A working swale at the courthouse would bring the public riverfront all the way back to Cannery Square and 8th Ave. We tend to forget that portals always work two ways, and a grand portal here would signal and symbolize the way through.



Isn't it high time to do justice to our Millrace? And besides, how can the mills of justice grind without it?

Let's face it; most new buildings in Eugene don't generate this much interest. They're not Libraries, Hult Centers, Wildish Theaters or EWEB Headquarter buildings. They're primarily off the rack commercial ventures, built as cheaply as possible.

Take Yapoa Towers or our Hilton Hotel for example. Please!

But when skillful designers design and value engineer such everyday endeavors, we do occasionally get lucky and receive some extra architectural buzz. Mostly we just end up ignoring our senses, penciling out dollars and shuffling square feet.



So we should consider ourselves fortunate to have this new courthouse to feed a too often-parched passion for the art of architecture, to revive our awareness that forms and materials do mean and move us, and to watch over our best chance ever to return to the river.