

# Planning Court Facilities

Milt Nuzum and Mohsen Ghoreishi

**M**any courts face burgeoning caseloads that place demands on court facilities far beyond design capacity. Others work in outdated facilities that cannot accommodate current court-security standards or meet the needs of new court technology. This article addresses one court's experience from the unique perspectives of both the **judge** (Milt Nuzum) and the **consultant** (Mohsen Ghoreishi) in resolving these problems.

## The Idea

**As a judge**, I spend most of my time resolving conflicts. The facilities I use should do exactly that—facilitate the mission. It is patently obvious when they fail to do so. In my court, the facilities were not handicapped accessible; they did not meet our state's published jury accommodation standards, causing more than one mistrial; they could not meet our security standards; and they were overcrowded with staff located in four separate locations, not counting file storage in two additional buildings. It struck me and three of my predecessors going back more than 20 years that this was a problem that needed to be fixed. I undertook a 10-year mission to do so. The saga unfolds below.



**As a consultant** I am concerned about every aspect of the building project, not the least of which is the appearance of the building I am to design for my client. Should it be modern or traditional? Are the windows in the proper location? What color brick should I use? Will the building codes allow us to do this wild thing I would like to accomplish? In my profession, we hope our achievement will be recognized and published. We even aspire to win an award from an architectural magazine. However, the greatest satisfaction in designing a courthouse comes from receiving the accolades of the community in which you have invested your passion and soul in designing the building that serves them. Truly, the best reward for a courthouse designer is to see the building inspire and rejuvenate the public's respect for the rule of law and the work that goes on within the walls of the building. A new courthouse should bring back the memories of old days when people passing or entering such a structure felt a sense of the law and respect.

No public building symbolizes the freedom of this country more than a courthouse. It is this awesome

responsibility that a design professional undertakes when designing a courthouse.

We as design professionals, like the leaders of the community, must think not twice but three times about how we should approach a courthouse project. We must be honest and sincere with our community because a courthouse is positioned at the core of our society, and its impact remains for generations to come. This is a difficult task, and competing interests will tear at the very fabric of the project. Not every architect can design a courthouse, and not every politician can put politics aside to do what is best for the community.

## Pregame Preparation

**As a judge**, there were several important challenges that I faced in dealing with my courthouse capital project. Every project needs a major advocate and a leader. I do not recommend that you undertake the task personally, but if you have administrative responsibility in your court as I did, you must be engaged in the process. Perhaps the mantle of leadership will fall on your shoulders as it fell on me by default. Here are the initial

steps I took to achieve success.

- 1. Needs assessment.** This is the basis for the project. The leader needs a plan to assess the facilities needs of the court and evaluate the possibilities. An outside consultant can make this assessment professionally and help eliminate the perception that the needs you identified are self-serving to acquire nicer facilities. A consultant can assess your facilities to identify inadequacies; offer preliminary estimates of reasonable space requirements; and provide cost estimates to develop a preliminary budget. My funding authority actually commissioned at least five separate needs assessments by different architects over a 20-year period for this purpose. They all concluded there was a dire need to remedy the facilities situation and recommended strikingly similar solutions.
- 2. Needs acceptance.** This ongoing process is one of the most important parts of the project. Lobbying the local funding authorities is the same as running a political campaign. One can never stop marketing and educating local officials regarding the project. The funding authorities are usually elected officials.