

Federal Modern

Assessing and Preserving a Legacy

by Susan Piedmont-Palladino

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Charles Dickens was referring to the period just before the French Revolution, but could just as easily have been describing the architecture commissioned by the U.S. government after the Second World War, with its decidedly mixed legacy of buildings and cityscapes. The decades from the 1950s to the '70s gave us the architecture of the post-war economic boom and then the Great Society, with the promise of an efficient and transparent government enshrined in buildings to match. But during that time old buildings were regularly razed in the name of progress and too often replaced by banal boxes indistinguishable from typical office buildings of the time.

Now, what was once new is old, and one of the largest landlords and property managers in the country, the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), finds itself with a huge portfolio of buildings and landscapes, the majority of which were built in the last 50 years. The frequently used, catch-all descriptors "mid-century modern" and "post-war" embody in shorthand just how much the architecture after World War II differed in scale, style, and philosophy from that which came before. These differences pose unique challenges for the caretakers of that architectural legacy, and for the citizens in whose name these buildings were designed and constructed. In the United States, true modernism really arrived with the end of the war: literally, with the immigration of a generation of modern masters from Europe, and metaphorically, in that the end of the war marked the beginning of a more optimistic and prosperous era. Modern architecture was the symbol of that beginning.

Changing Attitudes Toward Governmental Architecture

There are hidden forces that shape the built environment, and they are at work before the architect and client ever draw the first line. In the case of federal construction, these hidden forces have often taken the form of executive orders and legislative acts, successively strengthening, enforcing, or even undoing various preceding directives. With so many contemporary design firms actively specializing in civic projects today, it is difficult to imagine that the appropriateness of the federal government's procurement of design services from the private sector was once hotly debated. The Tarsney Act of 1893 opened the doors to private firms like McKim, Mead and White, D.H. Burnham & Company, and the office of Cass Gilbert, but the act was repealed in 1912 over concerns that the private sector might be overcharging the government, proving that, while architectural tastes may change, friction over budgets is timeless. The biggest federal building boom started about two decades later, beginning with the Public Works Administration during the Great Depression, accelerating during the mobilization for World War II and escalating in the years following the war. The construction program even before the war more than doubled the total number of buildings under government ownership. In 1949, President Harry Truman established the GSA, recognizing the exponential increase in the responsibilities for designing and constructing the buildings that the larger central government would need, not to mention managing those that already existed. Indeed, in its first decade, the agency focused on simply bringing order to the diverse portfolio it had inherited.

By the early 1960s, a series of Executive Orders and Congressional legislation cemented attitudes that were already changing regarding federal building. Several attempted to remedy the perceived aloofness and insularity of the first modern buildings. Among the most influential was a set of principles issued in 1962 that came from a committee convened by President John F. Kennedy to take stock of the state of federal architecture. Written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a lifelong champion of excellence in building and city design, the *Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture* encouraged the "finest contemporary American architectural thought." They urged architects to be sensitive to context, treat the site and landscape as equally important as the building, and warned against any official "style" of architecture. As with all guidelines, the generalities are unassailable, but the details are wicked. What is the "finest contemporary American architectural thought" and who decides? At the time, it wasn't entirely clear.

The twin forces of economic growth and the desire for newness threatened buildings and landscapes throughout the 1950s and '60s. Iconic single acts of destruction, such as the demolition of Penn Station in New York City, as well as the Federal Highway Administration's inexorable paving of city and countryside, were among the forces that motivated the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act. Recognizing that the "spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic

below: The U.S. Tax Court in Washington, D.C., was designed by Victor Lundy and completed in 1974. The building won a GSA Honor Award in the agency's first Design Awards program in 1972. Photo by Carol M. Highsmith Photography, Inc., courtesy of GSA.



above top: **The Federal Building in Des Moines, Iowa, after its completion in 1968.**

Photo by Wetherell Harrison Wagner and McKleeven, courtesy of GSA.

above bottom: **The Federal Building after recladding.**

below: **Designed by Marcel Breuer and Associates and constructed from 1965 to 1968, the Robert C. Weaver Federal Building in Washington, D.C., was the first federal building in the country to use precast concrete as the primary structural and exterior finish material.**

Photo by Ben Schnall, courtesy of GSA.

opposite right: **The four-story central public hall, also called the Hall of Justice, in the U.S. Tax Court in Washington, D.C. The hall is crowned by a clerestory roof that admits light into the space.**

Photo by Carol M. Highsmith Photography, Inc., courtesy of GSA

heritage,” the language of the act expressed a sense of urgency: “Historic properties significant to the Nation’s heritage are being lost or substantially altered, often inadvertently, with increasing frequency.” Preserving these properties in the “face of ever-increasing extensions of urban centers, highways, and residential, commercial, and industrial developments” was clearly in the national interest. Just three years later, the National Environmental Policy Act was passed, extending similar protections to the natural environment, in recognition of the “profound impact of man’s activity on the interrelations of all components of the natural environment.” The same threats were cited: “influences of population growth, high-density urbanization, industrial expansion, resource exploitation”; and the same motivations: to “preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage.”

A Campaign to Preserve Modern Landmarks

Today the complex interplay between environmental conservation and historic preservation is being brought to bear on the very buildings and landscapes that were young then. The irony is inescapable: The National Historic Preservation Act set out to protect the familiar, often beloved, yet arguably inefficient and old-fashioned buildings of previous centuries from demolition by the forces of progress. Now, the very buildings that were once the enemies of history may enjoy the generous embrace of preservation...if they can pass the test. The 1966 act fundamentally changed the way the government, the public, and the design community saw older buildings, but seeing the work of the recent past in the same light still poses a challenge. “In many people’s minds,” explains Rolando Rivas-Camp, FAIA, director of GSA’s Center for Historic Buildings, “historic’ equals ‘traditional,’ so making the case to preserve modern buildings is a challenge.” To address that challenge, the center issued *Growth, Efficiency and Modernism: GSA Buildings from the 50s, 60s and 70s*. The study includes a rigorous set of criteria for assessing the merit of modern federal properties. “In evaluating these properties,” notes David L. Winstead, commissioner of GSA’s Public Buildings Service, “we must consider not only the building’s architecture, but its potential historical significance, and the significance it may have to the community.” In some cases, being able to connect a building to a specific architect is sufficient to save it, or at least forestall its demolition.

Such was the case with the Strom Thurmond Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse, in Columbia, South Carolina. Completed in 1979, the exposed rough concrete, or *béton brut*, building expressed its divided functions with the courthouse in a horizontal wing and the office space in a tower, both connected by a plaza. In 2003 the federal courts left for new quarters, leaving the fate of the structure in doubt. Not well-loved even when new, it had few champions and the circumstances of its construction were not well known. Through the efforts of Jeffrey Jensen, a historic preservation specialist with GSA’s Southeast Sunbelt Region, however, it was revealed to be one of the very last works by the Bauhaus master Marcel Breuer, in partnership with Herbert Beckhard. The building’s attribution to Breuer raised its value, even as questions about his actual contribution to the design fueled the debate. While the office tower still houses federal workers, the courthouse wing now sits vacant. With the original modern interiors for the major spaces still intact, this late work of Marcel Breuer awaits another use.

Determining the Fate of Less Important Structures

Clearly, not everything warrants preservation. Deciding among the alternatives—renovate, re-clad, reuse, or demolish—involves evaluating the relative merits of the structure itself and its potential for other uses. The reuse of the Strom Thurmond Courthouse is difficult precisely because of the orthodox modernism of its architects; the more faithfully form follows function the more resistant the building is to *new* functions. And function isn’t the only issue that makes evaluating mid-20th-century modern architecture difficult. While conservation techniques for pre-modern buildings are well-developed, they are just being developed for modern materials and methods, many of which were still experimental when first used. The Federal Building in Des Moines, Iowa, was beset by technical problems almost immediately after it was completed in 1968. GSA assessed its architectural significance and found little. With the support of the local architectural community the decision was made to give the building a makeover. In this case, being both modern and architecturally unremarkable allowed the Des Moines building to avoid demolition and instead have its technology and appearance upgraded. Environmental conservation took precedence over historic preservation: less material for the landfill, and much of the embodied energy in the structure and infrastructure was re-used.

Federal construction has been influenced by all of the same movements and counter-movements that have swept through architecture and design as a whole in the last century, each seemingly convinced of the errors of its immediate predecessors. The ethos of preservation has given us a more generous perspective on the past, including the recent past. “We have a responsibility to the evolution of architecture,” says Rivas-Camp. “We can’t cut out a part of it and still claim to tell a true or complete story.” Modernism itself is more eclectic than we often think, encompassing stripped classicism, New Deal murals and heroic sculpture, streamlined Art Deco, *béton brut*, and the much-maligned glass box. Each building and landscape in GSA’s portfolio reflects some aspect of the relationship between the government and the citizens at the time the project was built. The Center for Historic Buildings is marshalling the spirit of the *Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture* with the principles of stewardship in the National Historic Preservation Act to ensure that the “finest contemporary American architectural thought” is represented from every era of our history. •

WHAT’S IN A WORD? “Brutalism”

What began as a bi-lingual pun, usually attributed to influential architecture critic Reyner Banham, the label “brutalism” became the common name for a whole body of modern building. Literally translated from the French, *béton brut* means “raw concrete” and describes a style of modern architecture that expresses the truth of its own construction. Unfortunately, thanks to Banham’s quip, it became an apt mistranslation, worn as a badge of honor by some architects, but leveled as a rebuke by those who preferred their buildings finished and refined. Even the most cursory stroll down K Street or Pennsylvania Avenue, however, will only confirm the truth of the double meaning. Some buildings deserve the epithet “brutalist,” but others are just raw.

