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Courthouses: Community Catalysts, Civic Places



Courthouses are among the most traditional and symbolic of federal buildings. They carry the identity and communicate the values of the American federal system to every corner of the country. To this day, the government's Public Buildings Service regards courthouses as its highest profile public projects — shouldering an expectation that post offices, custom houses and federal office buildings once shared.

But courthouses can be complicated from a community development point of view. The sensitive nature of the activities that occur inside them make it difficult to design buildings that encourage multiple uses. The number of people who work in courthouses or visit them is often less than for a comparably sized retail or office building.

These case studies explore two federal courthouses that demonstrate different approaches to being good community partners. In Boston, the design and management of the John Joseph Moakley Courthouse are very

much oriented towards encouraging everyday public use. In Tacoma, an abandoned train station was turned into a courthouse as part of a strategy of reinvigorating a neglected area of the city.

Across the country, one can find stories of federal courthouses where activities like festivals, markets and concerts take place, and more. For more details on the case studies presented here and examples elsewhere, visit www.better-buildings.org, sponsored by the U.S. General Services Administration in conjunction with related organizations. These places are testimony to GSA's commitment to making federal buildings a positive, active force in shaping urban development and the life of urban communities.

Above: The conversion of Tacoma's historic Union Station into a new federal courthouse sparked additional investment in the area, including a University of Washington campus, several museums, and new waterfront housing. Courtesy City of Tacoma.



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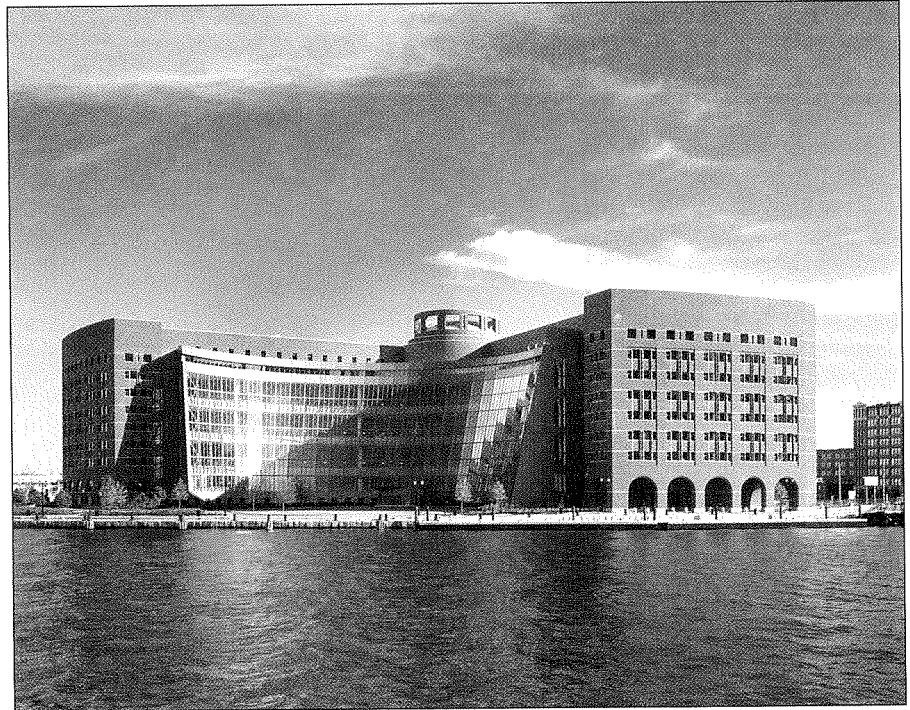
Boston: The People's Courthouse

From the outset, the Moakley Courthouse in Boston has been thought of as the “people’s” courthouse. It’s not that the kind of disputes commonly aired in television courtrooms are settled there. Rather, the judges, architects and GSA staff who designed the courthouse wanted it to play an active part in Boston’s civic life.

The result is a court building that welcomes the public in remarkable ways, especially in today’s security-conscious climate. A second-floor cafeteria and a ground-floor restaurant overlook the harbor. Exhibitions, concerts and lectures, as well as privately organized events, are staged in an upper-level atrium and galleries, as well as in waterfront open spaces. A variety of public education programs are based at the courthouse, including tours, lectures, mock trials and dramas that relate to the history of justice. Altogether, the building welcomes some 4,000 users and visitors a day, and some 150 special events take place there every year.

Several factors make this possible:

- *A commitment from the judiciary.* The judges who planned the building and hold court there have a long-standing commitment to making the building a community and civic center.
- *Attentive architecture.* The building’s design maximizes public access to and views of the harbor, strengthens local pedestrian connections, and provides ample, yet flexible, space for gatherings and programs within a dignified courthouse setting.
- *A unique management structure.* Routine maintenance, public programming and special events are coordinated by a private contractor; educational programming is organized by local non-profit



groups; retail leasing is managed directly by GSA.

Civic Vision, Civic Architecture

The Moakley Courthouse would be an important public building if for no other reason than its prominent location. It is sited on Boston Harbor, just east of Fort Point Channel, and is clearly visible from downtown and East Boston. It’s located at the landing of a busy footbridge that connects downtown with the Fort Point district, where museums, galleries and art-related businesses are being coupled with new development such as hotels and a convention center. And it occupies frontage along the Harborwalk, a public promenade that runs along Boston’s waterfront.

Much of the courthouse’s commitment to public use comes from the judges who hold court there. “If the public cannot use this site and see it as theirs — if every man, woman and child in Boston cannot take a walk on this pier, and see it as theirs . . . then

we will have failed to achieve an important goal of this courthouse project,” wrote U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Stephen Breyer, who helped plan the courthouse as an appeals court judge in Boston.

Large events occur in the courthouse’s “Great Hall,” a second-floor atrium that offers a dramatic, sweeping view of the harbor and downtown Boston, or on the grassy lawn outside. Certain spaces such as courtrooms, the jury assembly room even the judge’s dining room have been used on a selective basis for special civic or educational activities. The judges sometimes get involved in the activities themselves, presiding over mock trials, teaching elementary school students or

Above: The John Joseph Moakley Courthouse, Boston. Courtesy Boston Courthouse Management Associates.

Opposite: The public spaces of the courthouse overlook a harborfront park and public walkway. Tour boats, water taxis, and historic vessels dock alongside the courthouse, which provides space for a restaurant and environmental interpretive center. Photos © Pamela Cobb photography.

leading behind-the-scenes tours.

The civic intentions for the courthouse, which extend beyond the symbolic role that courthouse architecture usually plays, were communicated to the designers from the outset through extensive conversations with the judges. The designers had three main goals, according to architect Harry Cobb: to assert the principle that the courts are open to the public, to give the public a chance to experience “an extraordinary place where the city meets the sea,” and to show how civic buildings and civic space can confer meaning and value on each other.

The configuration of the courthouse is driven by its harborside location: more than half the site was reserved for generous greens, gardens and terraces that invite public use alongside the waterfront. There is an entry from the waterside, at one point resisted by the U.S. Marshals (who oversee court security) for security and cost reasons, but insisted upon by the judges who were overseeing the design and construction, Cobb noted.

The building addresses the harbor with a curving, sloping glass wall, behind which are the most public of the interior spaces: the Great Hall, a dining area, exhibition space and upper-level galleries that lead to courtrooms. Thus the most spectacular views are dedicated to the general public: “When you walk along the wall from one side of the atrium to the other, you see a constantly changing vista,” said Patrick Sclafani, GSA’s on-site property manager. At night, light glows through the wall, as if the building were a beacon or lighthouse.

Though the courthouse was planned for heavy public use, there are no formally designed event spaces, according to Valerie Reid, BCMA’s director. The open configuration of the Great Hall allows for “enormous



flexibility,” contributing to its success as an event space, she explained. And holding gatherings in the atrium of a courthouse has special cachet, she added: “If the space had been designed specifically for events, it would not have the same appeal.”

At one corner of the building, some small storefronts, an arcade and a dock mark the meeting of Harborwalk and the pedestrian bridge leading downtown and create a hub of activity, especially in warmer weather. Some critics have faulted the building’s southern facade, which addresses a street busy with pedestrian through traffic, but has no storefronts and few entrances or street-level windows, as being relatively lifeless. On the other hand, the base of the building features granite panels, placed at eye level, that are inscribed with quotes that reflect on the justice system. A new streetscape design, with landscaping and benches that take into account current security concerns, is underway.

A Hub of Community and Educational Activity

The complex range of activities that take place in and around the Moakley Courthouse — from trials and other government business, to cultural and educational programs, to the restaurants and boat moorings — are sponsored by a number of groups. Almost everything is coordinated by an on-site contractor, Boston Courthouse Management Associates, with GSA, the courts and security services providing different aspects of oversight.

BCMA has three main responsibilities: handling routine building maintenance, coordinating requests that outside groups submit for using public spaces, and organizing cultural and community programs that are open, at no charge, to the public. GSA handles



leasing for vendors such as the cafeteria and the harborside retail.

The courthouse is marketed to Boston’s event-planning and meeting industry, “similar to the seaport, the Hines Convention Center, the World Trade Center,” Scafani says. The spaces inside the courthouse can accommodate about 1,300 people, the gardens outside another 600 people. Events include corporate dinners, college reunions, association meetings and awards ceremonies. There are a few basic ground rules: no activity can disturb the workings of the court, events can’t be staged to make a profit, no money can change hands in the courthouse and personal events like weddings aren’t allowed.

Many of the programs that take place in the building are organized directly by BCMA. For example, BCMA works with local cultural groups and artists, associations to curate art shows in the lobby and atrium. The shows generally rotate quarterly, and “the expectation was that local artists would have a place for displaying their work, though we’re not restricted to that,” Reid said.

BCMA also organizes a monthly concert series with the help of local chamber music societies, and is teaming up with local employment agencies to organize a job fair.

Since the courthouse opened in 1998, it has been the base of operations for “Discovering Justice,” an innovative court education program that reaches students of all ages, as well as the general public. The program, run by the James D. St. Claire Court Education Project, includes an elementary school curriculum that culminates with a visit to the courthouse, a legal apprenticeship program that helps middle-schoolers prepare mock trials staged in courtrooms, and courtroom dramas where high school students can engage with the actors in character and discuss the issues with a judge.

Above: Northern Avenue, a busy pedestrian thoroughfare between downtown and the Fort Point district passes by the south facade of the courthouse.

Photos © Pamela Cobb Photography.

Opposite: An event in the Great Hall.

Courtesy Boston Courthouse Management Associates



St. Claire's lecture series invites judges, scholars, attorneys and journalists to speak on issues of justice in the courthouse's Jury Assembly Room, and the group trains docents who give public tours of the building. Last summer, a group of "courthouse apprentices" studied the architecture and symbolism of the building and produced "A Kid's Guide to the Moakley Courthouse," which will be distributed to students who visit this year.

Along the waterfront, an educational and advocacy group called the Harbor Island Alliance runs a "Discovery Center" and gift shop in one of the retail spaces. The center offers exhibits about the natural resources and history of the islands in Boston Harbor, and serves as a launching point for educational cruises. This year GSA will also provide space for a ranger station for the National Park Service.

And GSA is arranging the design and installation of wayside exhibits along the Harbor Walk. Three interpretive panels, under design by Jon Roll and Associates, will look at the

history of the waterfront; other signage will describe the native landscaping. Sclafani said that the steering committee that planned the courthouse had hoped for a museum space within the building, but that there was a concern about the limited amount of space in the new building and about how another structure could be integrated into the site. The idea for the panels came out of a charrette that was organized to brainstorm how GSA might provide interpretive information about the area, he said.

Challenges in Public Use

Making such intensive public use of a federal courthouse doesn't come easy. One of the biggest challenges, both Reid and Sclafani say, is staying on top of the wear and tear generated by the building's extended operating hours and by events that can bring in hundreds of people. "You name it, painting, floor care, freight elevator, service areas, HVAC equipment," Reid said. "It is a concern that needs constant attention."

From a marketing point of view, the courthouse presents both chal-

lenges and opportunities, Reid said. "The security requirements in this building add to the cost of the event, and guests aren't allowed to bring cell phones inside," she explained. The trade-off is that the character and location are hard to compare: "People love the view, the feeling, the architecture," she said. "Once we get event planners and potential clients in the door, they're hooked." And BCMA works closely with clients to prevent security bottlenecks by planning ahead. For example, the courthouse has extra magnetometers in place so guests at even the largest events are not delayed in entering the building.

Another key issue is respecting the dignity of the building's primary function as a courthouse and maintaining good relationships with judges. "We have established a partnership, a shared philosophy, and a working relationship that respects the dignity of the courts while fulfilling everyone's vision for the courthouse," Sclafani said. "And that commitment is as strong now as it was the day we started."

The bottom line is minimizing the impact of activities on the operations and presence of the courts. Daytime concerts are scheduled for the courts' lunch break. Set-up can't start until the end of the day, events can't start until 6 p.m., and everything has to be removed and cleaned at the end of the event. "Court business starts by seven the next morning, and it has to look like nobody was ever here," Reid said. "If you want to keep the clients and the tenants happy, you have to be very good with timelines, and stay on top of the details."

Transforming Tacoma

Not too long ago, Tacoma's Union Station was considered to be on the wrong side of the tracks. Built in 1911 as the western terminus of the Northern Pacific's transcontinental line, it was abandoned after Amtrak relocated passenger service in 1984. The surrounding area was so rough that personnel from nearby military bases were told to stay away, and the nearby waterfront was so polluted that it was declared a federal Superfund site.

In the past decade, however, this forlorn place has seen a remarkable revival. The University of Washington has established a downtown campus there, three museums have been built, housing is going up along a waterfront promenade, and a light-rail line provides links to downtown and to Seattle.

By almost every account, the catalyst for this turnaround was the unlikely marriage between the U.S. District Court and the deteriorating station. The historic station was renovated and a modern wing was added to make a new home for the courts, which moved there from downtown in 1992. The project was instigated by citizen activists, nudged along by a local congressman, backed by Congress, coordinated by the city and funded by the city and state.

The investment in the new and renovated facilities was relatively modest, about \$50 million. But it was hugely symbolic, and has helped trigger nearly a half-billion dollars in public and private investment in the immediate area. "There are things going on that we never expected to see when we moved down here," said U.S. District Judge Robert Bryan, who oversaw the project for the federal court. "The federal presence made things seem possible, rather than impossible."

Assembling Support

Union Station occupies an important place in Tacoma's psyche. The city worked hard to beat out Seattle and become, in 1873, the terminus of a rail line that reached to the Great Lakes and beyond. Civic boosters soon christened Tacoma as the "City of Destiny."

But those high hopes were repeatedly dashed. Tacoma had to lobby the railroad for nearly forty years before it built a station worthy of the city's ambitions. The architects (Reed and Stem, who designed New York City's Grand Central Terminal) designed a station that fully resonated with the spirit of the time, but whose copper dome soon sprung a leak.

And not long after the station was finished in 1911, passenger railroad travel began its long, inexorable decline. The station's usefulness declined, and the railroad converted the waiting and dining rooms to office space. The building's upkeep, never easy because of poor roof design, became increasingly difficult; the rotunda was closed in 1981 because of damage to the ceiling. After Amtrak relocated in 1984, the station was boarded up, the passenger concourse was torn down to make way for a free-way spur into downtown, and thieves looted the brass and copper.

The Burlington Northern Railroad, which owned the station, began making plans to demolish what was left. But citizens organized a grassroots group, "Save our Station," and began searching for a way to re-use it. They sought the help of the city, which had taken the option to buy the station if it could find a new user, and local Congressman Norman Dicks.

The city sought proposals for the station, but found no takers. Then a letter appeared in the local newspaper: Why not use it as a new courthouse? Though the federal government was

looking for more office space in Tacoma, the court itself had no plan to move, Bryan recalled. Nevertheless, Dicks seized on the idea and presented it to the district's chief judge, who acquiesced to the proposal.

GSA was reluctant to come aboard; the complications were considerable. It was difficult to imagine how a building that was designed, after all, as a train station could provide functional court space. Civic leaders were demanding continued public access to the station, while courts were generally cautious about opening their facilities to general use. There was the issue of the building's location, a few blocks too far from the heart of downtown. Dicks kept the pressure on, sponsoring legislation in 1987 that directed GSA to use the train station for a new courthouse and provided funds for an architectural feasibility study.

The first stumbling block to tackle was financing. Most courthouses are funded through Congressional appropriations, but there was no such money for this project. So Tacoma and GSA worked out an arrangement in which the city would manage the project and fund it through lease-revenue bonds, backed by a thirty-year GSA lease. "The real challenge was entering into a fixed-price agreement, not knowing what the building would cost," recalled city engineer Craig Sivley, who managed the project for Tacoma's public works department. "It was a tremendous risk for the city."

Reinhabiting a Classic Building

The next challenge, fitting a modern courthouse into an 85-year-old railroad terminal, touched mainly on two issues. The station did not have enough usable space, and making productive and public use of the space there would require creative modifications of standard court

design principles.

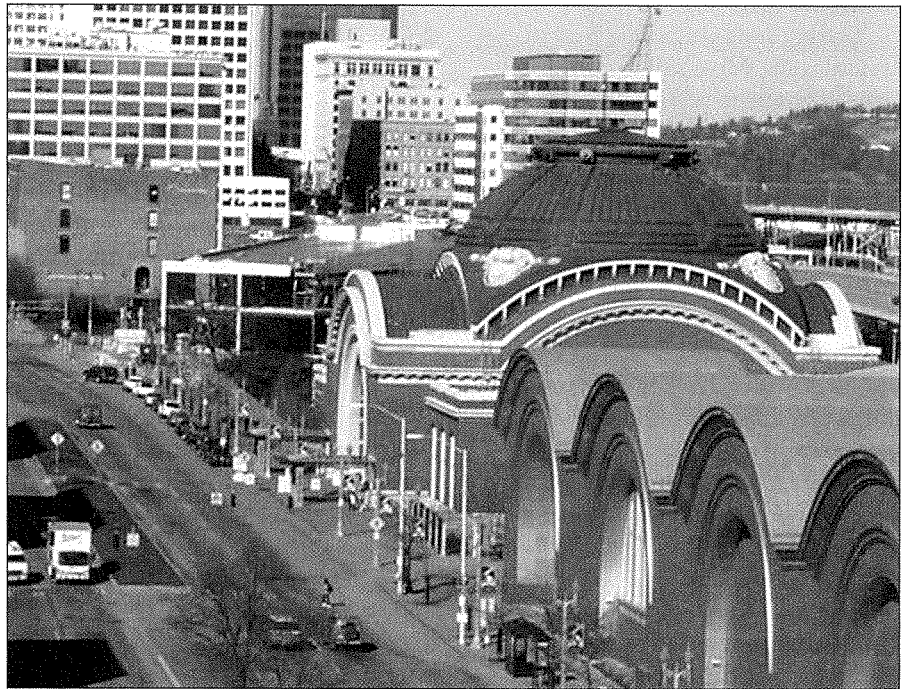
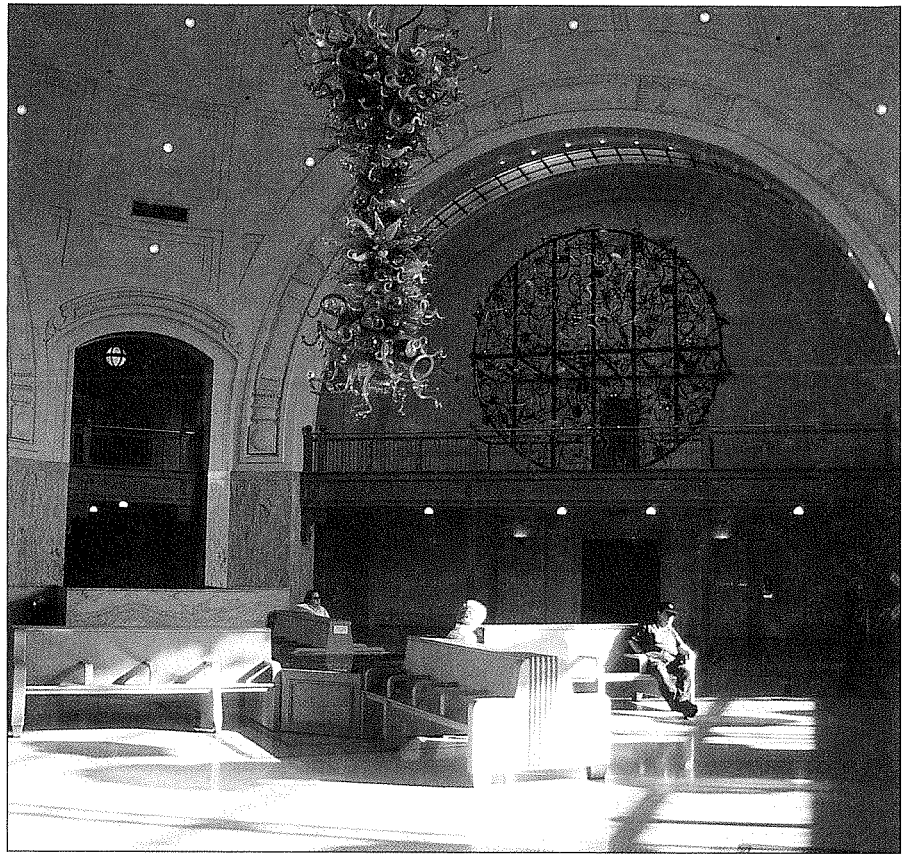
“It’s a great big building, but most of the space was in the rotunda, and it was not sufficient for a courthouse,” Bryan recalled. “So it became apparent early on that we would have to add on, which nobody had anticipated. And that meant we had to think of some way to use this historic building.”

There was not enough floor space in the wings off the rotunda to accommodate a courtroom, chambers and jury room all in one place. But judges and the architects (Merritt+Pardini/TRA) found a solution: the ceilings were so high that an extra floor could be tucked underneath. “When we hit on the idea of stacking the chambers and using a balcony row of seating in the courtroom, we were able to make the station work,” Bryan said.

The next problem was balancing public access and security concerns. Since most of the court space would be in a new wing behind the historic station, “we could leave the rotunda open and move security to the rear, except when circumstances would require security at the front door,” Bryan explained. That has happened only a handful of times, he added.

GSA’s eventual commitment to the project, and assurance that public access to the rotunda could be maintained, unlocked other resources. The Washington State Legislature provided \$4 million to cover the costs of acquiring the building and restoring the exterior. The City of Tacoma borrowed \$41 million to rehabilitate the station and build the new courthouse.

Union Station thus re-opened triumphantly in 1992 as a federal courthouse. Several thousand people showed up for its rededication, wondering perhaps if this civic celebration held any more promise than the one held eighty years earlier. This time, because of the federal government’s



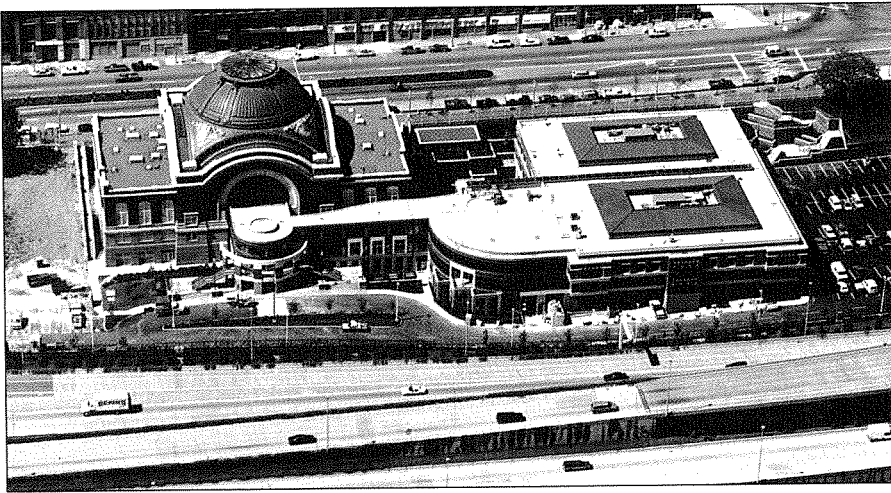
firm commitment to the area, and because of the city’s ability to capitalize on that commitment, the story has turned out quite differently.

A Community Gathering Place

Despite the heightened security concerns resulting from the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in

Above: The Union Station Rotunda, with Dale Chihuly’s “Cobalt Blue Chandelier” and light cast by “Monarchs” on the floor. Photo by Todd W. Bressi.

Below: Union Station, with the new Washington State History Museum (foreground) and the new Tacoma Art Museum (under construction) flanking it, and the center of the city just beyond. Photo courtesy GSA Public Buildings Service, Pacific Northwest/Arctic Region.



Oklahoma City and the attack on the World Trade Center, the Union Station rotunda has reestablished itself as one of Tacoma's grandest public spaces. Public access has changed little since the courthouse first opened: the rotunda is open to the public during business hours and for special events at other times. Visitors must now show identification at the front door, but the courts' security checkpoint is still at the rear.

The rotunda is a public resource in several ways. Most significantly, perhaps, it has been reinvented as one of the most stunning public art galleries in the Puget Sound region. Glass sculptor Dale Chihuly (a Tacoma native) and the Tacoma Art Museum teamed up to loan five projects that are installed in the rotunda. Chihuly also displays conceptual drawings of upcoming projects there, and his studio provides a full-time, on-site docent to answer questions and give tours.

GSA also makes the space available for cultural events. The rotunda is a key stop on Tacoma's ArtWalk, which allows the public to tour cultural facilities for free one evening each month. On those evenings GSA has helped organize activities like a performance by ballet students and an arts fair that provides teachers with a chance to learn about local youth arts programs.

The rotunda can also be rented for events like graduation ceremonies, weddings and banquets. About forty of these events take place each year, usually in the evening, following a protocol set GSA and the courts set up to ensure that events do not disturb

court proceedings, building manager Rick Gordon said.

"Courts have always been a center of community in this country, but I don't know of a court, except the U.S. Supreme Court, where there has been such an effort to make it a public building and invite people in for matters that are not court related," Bryan said. "This is still a social center and a historic center of Tacoma."

A Catalyst for Change

As the Union Station arrangements came together and design got underway, the city turned its attention to the worn-out warehouse district that surrounds it and the polluted waterfront on the other side of the freeway. "If we could get this courthouse squared away, we thought, it would turn that neighborhood around," said Sivley.

The first step was persuading the Washington State Historical Museum, which needed more space, to relocate from its facility on the north side of town. The city provided a site right next door to the station and the state underwrote the \$36 million construction cost of a new building designed by architects Moore-Andersson Associates very much in the spirit of Union Station. "What worked effectively is that we could show a symbiotic relationship between the projects," Sivley said.

With those projects in the pipeline, city leaders turned their attention to the dilapidated warehouse district across the street. They realized one missing link in the city was higher education, and organized a bid for an

expansion campus for the University of Washington. Tacoma won, and the university began a \$124 million project to retrofit several square blocks of old buildings and add new ones. The campus opened in 1997; currently 2,000 students are enrolled, with plans to expand and serve more than 9,000 students within a decade.

Meanwhile, the city was also beginning plans for the nearby waterfront, which had been designated a federal Superfund site. The city purchased the land for \$6.8 million, worked out an innovative agreement for cleaning it up on an incremental basis, and developed a master plan for housing and public uses. By summer, 2002, the first stretch of a 1.5-mile esplanade had been completed, along with a \$63 million museum devoted to glass and a \$35 million privately-developed building with retail space along the water and 215 apartments above.

Linking it together is a pedestrian walkway that leads from the waterfront esplanade, up the side of the glass museum onto a public terrace, and across the freeway on a \$6 million "bridge of glass" with dramatic installations also designed by Chihuly. The bridge lands at the courthouse and state history museum and connects, across the street, to the main pedestrian spine of the University of Washington campus.

Finally, the Union Station-Waterfront district has a rail connection once again. A new light-rail line, open this year, connects in one direction to Tacoma's historic downtown and, in the other, to Puget Sound's regional commuter rail network. Union Station has become, perhaps for the first time, the symbolic gateway and catalyst for a re-energized city that it was always intended to be.

Above: The Union Station-Courthouse complex, with new addition connected by a passage leading from the rear of the historic structure. Courtesy City of Tacoma.