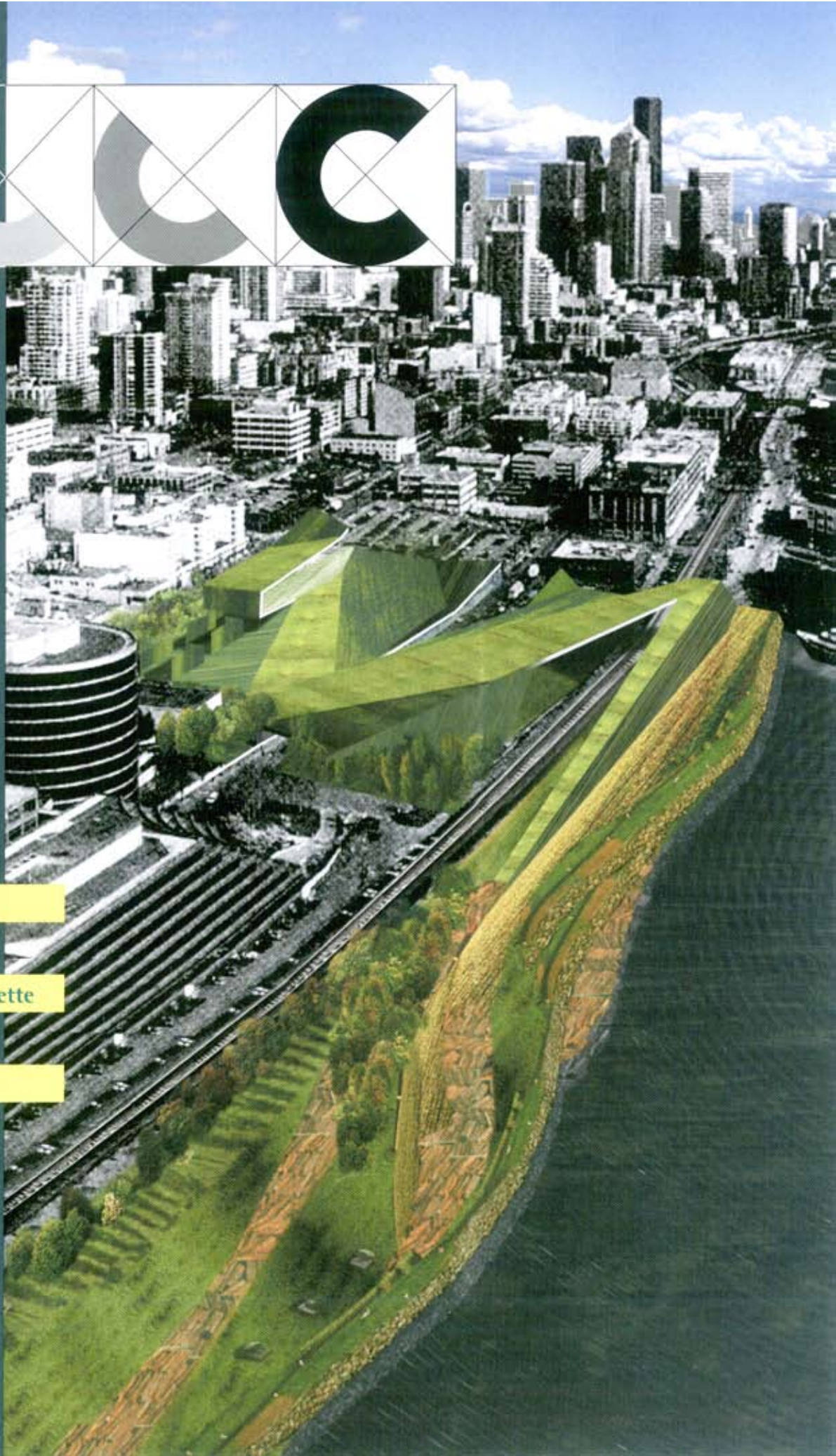


Spring 2003



COMPETITIONS



U.S. Institute of Peace

Nashville Courthouse Charrette


Interview: Weiss/Manfredi

Architecture
Art
Planning

A MODERN BUILDING BLOCK FOR MOBILE

Mobile, Alabama Federal Courthouse Design Competition

by James McCown



Mobile, Alabama could be called the Rodney Dangerfield of southern cities – it just doesn't get any respect. Older than New Orleans and Savannah, and with a cultural patrimony that rivals both, the Alabama port can only watch in envy as hordes of tourists and conventioners descend on

Winner

Moshe Safdie & Associates
Somerville, MA

Interior view of atrium
(opposite page)

Building perspective with view to entrance
(right)



other cities, even ones over which it can claim more history, folklore and architectural distinction.

To polish its appeal and market its substantial cultural assets as it begins its fourth century, Mobile has generally welcomed architectural competitions. The present City/County government building, the result of a competition which took place in the early 90s, produced an innovative modern design by Golemon-Bolullo of Houston, which allows for the seamless integration of City and County agencies in the event that a merger of the two governments should ever take place. Moreover, a relatively new convention center by Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback and Associates serves as a landmark on the waterfront.

The exercise to design a new Federal courthouse, part of the General Services Administration's Excellence in Architecture program, was completed in November 2002. The GSA chose **Moshe Safdie and Associates** of Somerville, MA as the winner, the other three firms being **Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects**, Atlanta; **Wolf Architecture**, Los Angeles; and **Garrison Architects**, New York.

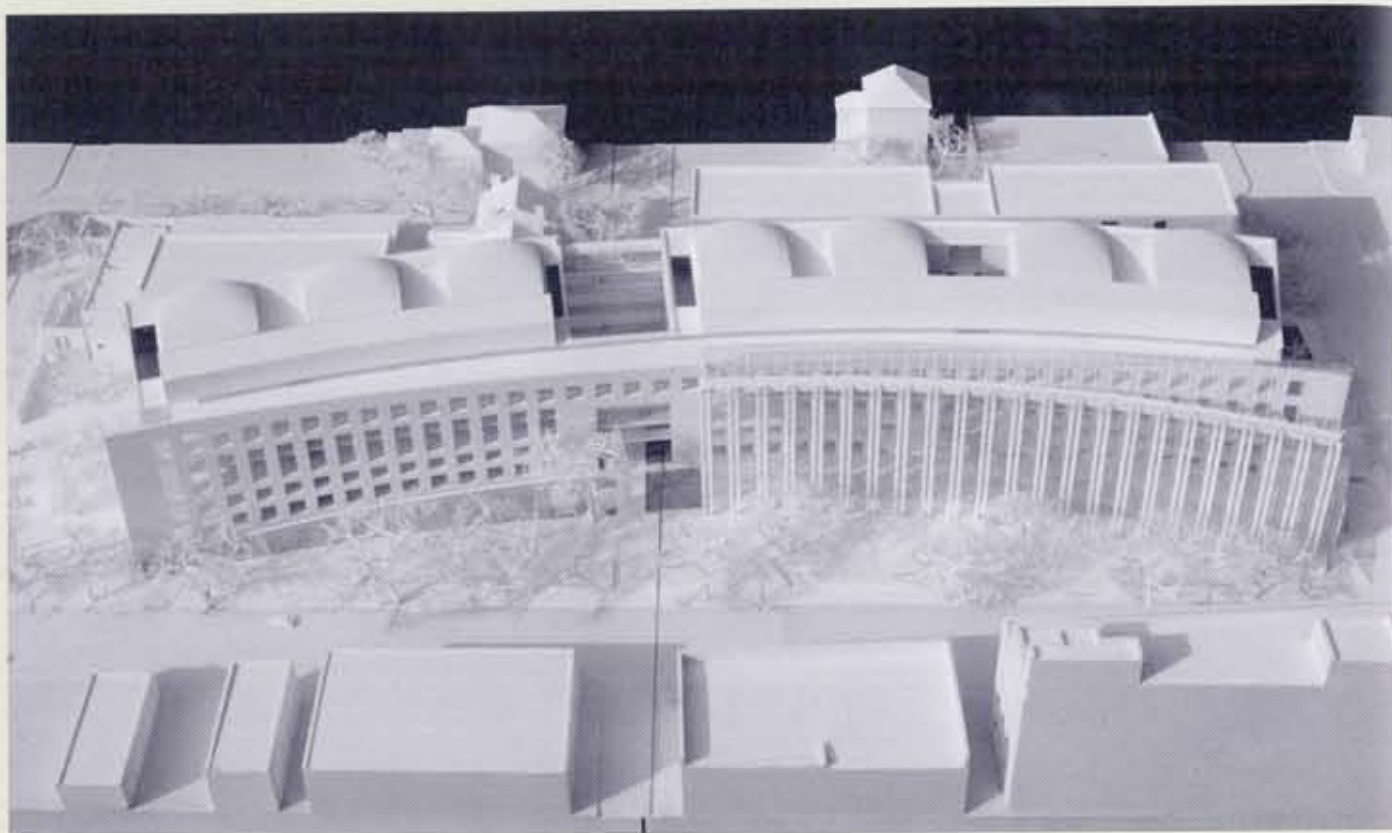
Safdie has been here before, conceptually if not geographically. He has completed design work on the new Federal Courthouse for Springfield, Massachusetts (COMPETITIONS, Vol. 9, No. 4), a GSA competition he

"There was no definite site per se, only what the GSA refers to as its 'preferred location.'"

won in 1999, and construction has begun on his new Telfair Museum of Art in Savannah, located on one of the city's trademark green squares. Indeed Safdie, who was born in Haifa, Israel and grew up in the icy confines of Montreal, seems oddly at home within the subtropical Deep South.

"We came here and saw the beautiful oak trees, the lovely houses with their porches, a feel reminiscent of Savannah and other great southern cities," said Safdie in an interview in his Boston office. "We felt a need to do something that spoke to the spirit of Mobile."

The protocol of the Mobile Courthouse competition was a little different because there was no definite site per se, only what the GSA refers to as its "preferred location." Still under negotiation for purchase, these three downtown blocks are bounded by St. Joseph, St. Anthony, St. Louis and Joachim Streets. Like most other cities, Mobile suffered the ravages of ill-conceived "urban renewal" projects, and as a result its center has innumerable open parking lots scarring the urban fabric. But the courthouse site is considered important because it can act as a "hinge" between the city's commercial downtown and DeTonti Square, an historic residential neighborhood to the north of the site that is posting a slow but definite comeback. Architects were given fairly loose rein in deciding how the program's approxi-



Winner

**Moshe Safdie & Associates
Somerville, MA**

Aerial view of model (above)
Model showing atrium entrance (right)

Perspectives of atrium entrance (opposite page)



mately 323,000 square-foot program would be distributed among the chosen parcels.

"It is very impressive how the new building establishes a connection with the residential area, how it embraces the existing John A. Campbell courthouse, and how it creates a central gathering place for the community," said Jay Chatterjee, Professor of architecture at the University of Cincinnati and a member of the jury. Chatterjee and his colleagues had originally been given a list of 37 firms, which they then whittled down to four.

"I found the process fascinating," said Bert W. Milling, Jr., U.S. Magistrate for Mobile. "It made me an architecture 'expert,' and I say that tongue in cheek. It was interesting to listen to prominent architects who are not from here talk about Mobile. Those of use who grew up here are maybe a little too close to see it in perspective."

The four proposals were markedly different. The winner Safdie conceived a low-rise, light colored building spread across two blocks. Conception Street, which bisects the two blocks, will be turned into a pedestrian-only thoroughfare and will in a sense be a gateway to the DeTonti Square residential district. The main entrance will lead to a large glassed-in loggia containing a suspended grand staircase. Seen from above, the entire building will have a gentle arc, as if to embrace the moss-strewn Live Oak trees



on the site, a feature of which Mobile is inordinately proud.

"The trees are sacred," Safdie avers. "We didn't even consider moving them." The architect took other steps to respond to the city's uniqueness.

"This place is about low scale and light, airy architecture," Safdie said. Given society's collective aspirations for its system of justice, Safdie added, "we want a building that is open and transparent."

Harry Wolf of Wolf Architects also opted for a low-rise scheme but one that was expressed as a series of buildings spread over three blocks. Wolf used geometry and mathematics as guiding principles and envisioned a central mass comprised of four large cylinders housing the main courtrooms. These spaces would share a grand central lobby and the cylinders would be sliced at various points to allow for natural light.

"Justice is about maintaining order,

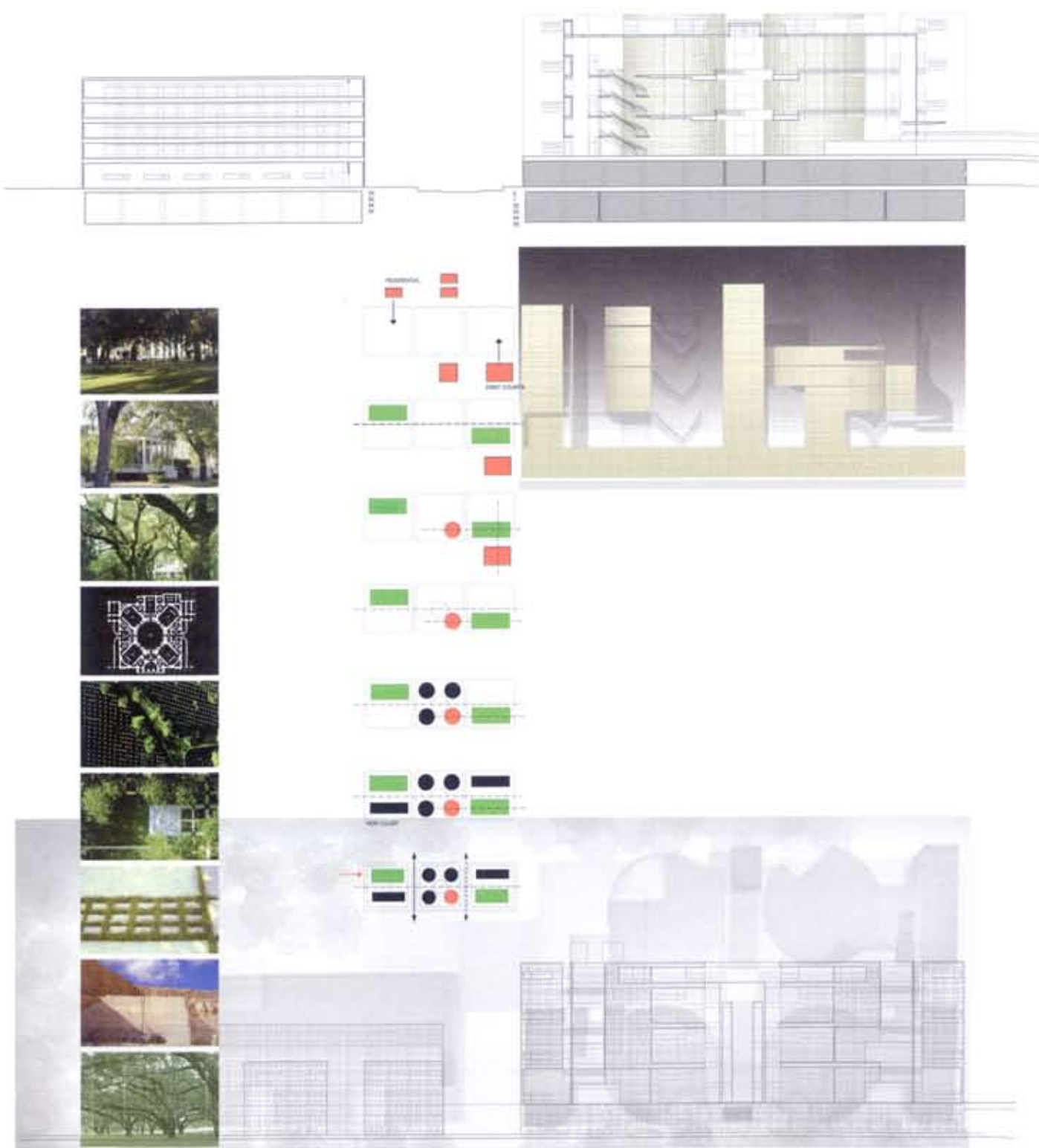
**"This place is about low scale and light, airy architecture."
-Moshe Safdie**

geometry is about creating order," said the West Coast-based Wolf. As an underlying system he employed the Fibonacci Sequence, devised during the Middle Ages, to establish proportional order throughout the complex. (Under this system, each number is derived from the sum of its two previous numbers, thus 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, and so on.)

"I wanted to create a place of quiet dignity, not the bombastic design that seems to be the order of the day," Wolf said. As for the four cylindrical courtrooms joined by a central space, he cites the precedent of James Gandon's Dublin Four Courts Building from the late 1700s. This Irish landmark has four courtrooms arrayed around a single round space which is capped by a domed cylinder, forming a prominent landmark along the city's River Liffy.

The other two proposals called for use of only one block for the building itself. Atlanta-based **Mack Scogin Merrill Elam**



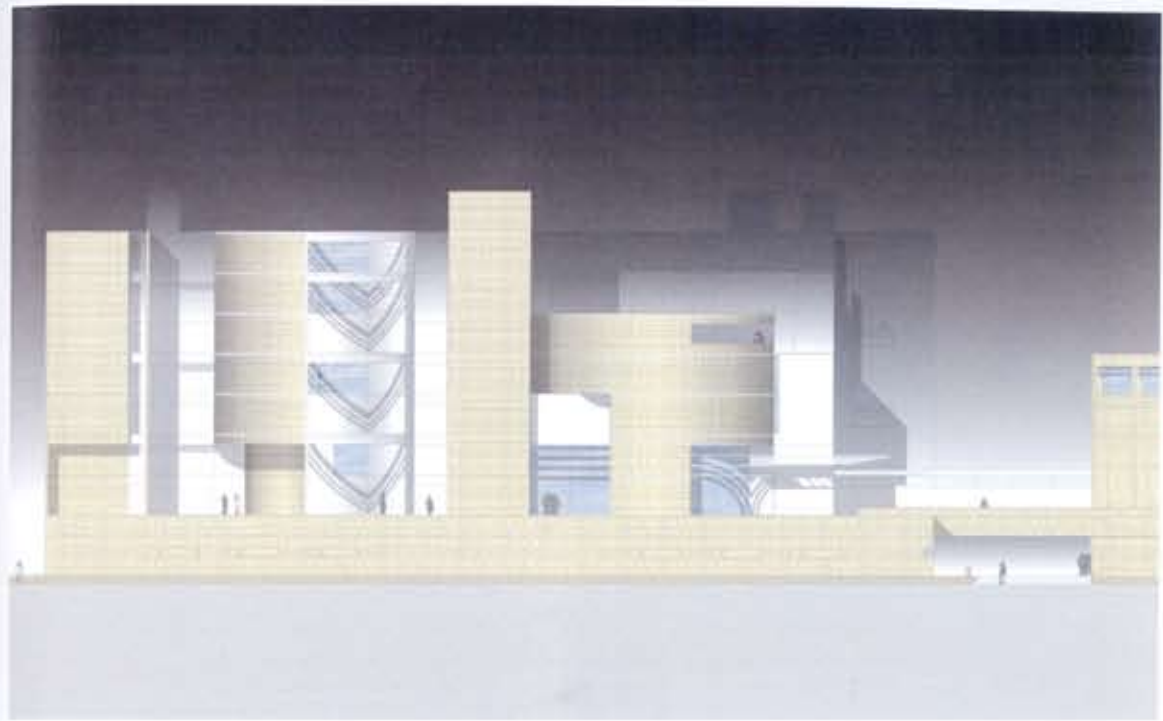


Architects proposed an 11-story building whose façades are an intriguing pattern of solids, voids and glass.
 "Seen from a distance, its mass is cubic, stable and solid," said Elam. "But at closer range, there is a porosity that associates the building with the delicate details of Mobile architecture—the wrought iron balconies, the wooden shutters." Flanking the building at either end are parks, the eastern one meant to recall the southern town squares

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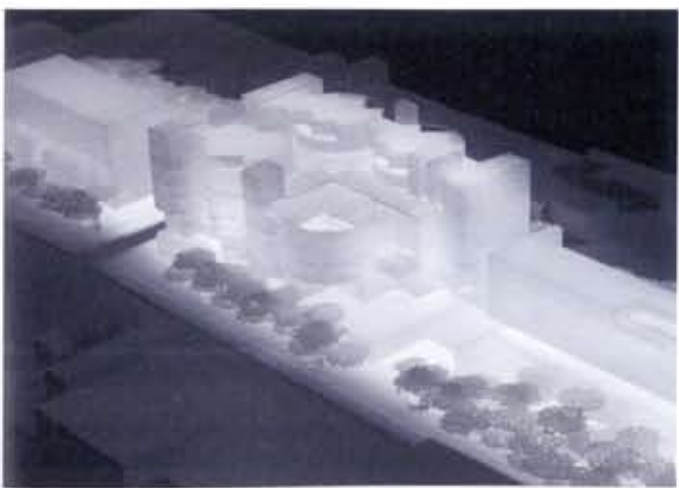
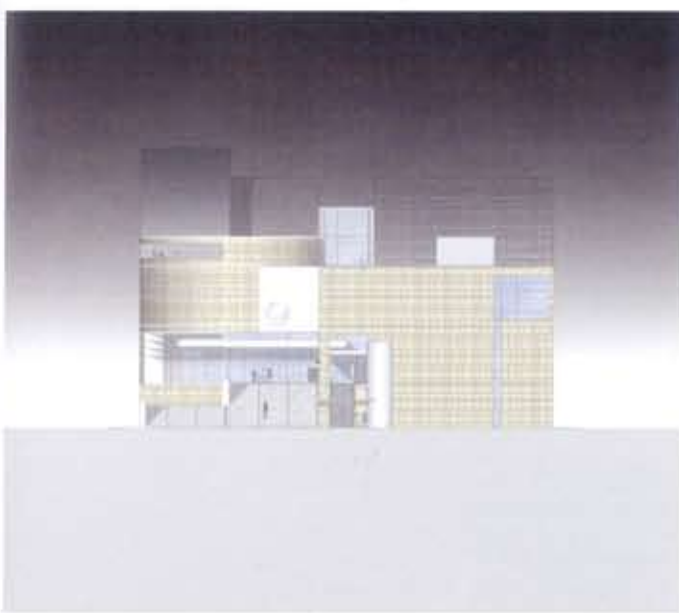
that generally front on county courthouses. The most unapologetically modernist of the designs was by New York architect **James Garrison**, whose tower would take up only one of the blocks but would allow for future expansion, as would the other schemes. And yet a modernist gesture is not completely unprecedented in downtown Mobile. Just one block south on St. Joseph Street is a 16-story tower that was originally the head-

(continued on page 40)



Finalist
Wolf Architects
 Los Angeles, CA

Sections, elevations and floor plans (opposite page)
 Exterior and interior perspectives (left and below)
 Model axonometric (bottom, left)





Finalist

**Mack Scogin/
Merrill Elam**
Atlanta, GA

Exterior and interior
perspectives
(left and below)

Sections, elevations,
interior view and
detail
(opposite page)



quarters of the Waterman Steamship Company and now occupied by a regional bank. The building, completed in 1949, uses a vaguely Corbusian system of louvers to mediate the legendary Mobile heat. Picking up this vocabulary, Garrison proposed a building that had similar fenestration.

"The Waterman Building is a great modernist piece," said Garrison. "I thought that with its presence on St. Joseph Street, the street could support 'bookends', that is the Waterman at one end and the courthouse at the other." In addition to relating to the older building, he added, his courthouse façade "speaks to the idea of justice as being a transparent process."

Despite not winning the competition, Garrison relates a story of a brief contact with retired Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan, who is the patron saint of the GSA's Excellence in Architecture program.

"I saw him in an airport, and went up and told him how much I admired his advocacy of architecture," Garrison said. "He turned to me and said, 'You've made an old man very happy.'"

James McCown, a native of Mobile, Alabama, is an architectural marketing and communications specialist based in Boston. His writing appears regularly in Boston Magazine, ArchitectureBoston, Art New England and other national and regional publications. He has collaborated on a number of books, including the Architecture in Detail series, recently released by Rockport Press.

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