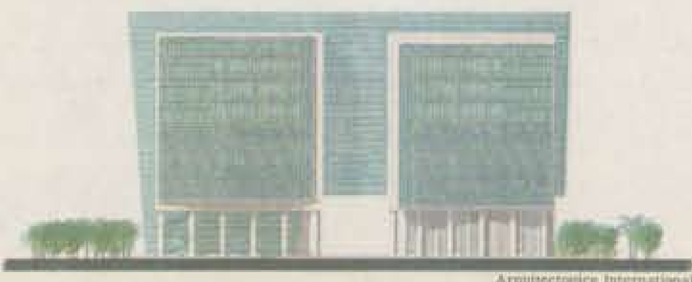

Arquitectonica International

Graceless geometric forms and a derivative skylight: Arquitectonica's design for a federal courthouse in Miami.

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Uncle Sam, Visionary Builder?

A 10-year effort to design the best possible federal buildings has yielded first-rate designs — and forbidding, parochial ones

Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects

Exploring the tension between democratic values and a fear of instability: Richard Meier's federal building in Central Islip on Long Island, above, and Mack Scogin Merrill Elam's courthouse in Austin, Tex., below, in the "Civic Spirit" show.

IN an age when government buildings are viewed more as terrorist targets than emblems of democratic values, the federal government's "Excellence in Architecture" program may seem an anachronism. Created in 1994, less than two years into the Clinton presidency, the program sought to raise the abysmal standards of design set in the 1970's and 80's, when American architecture was at a low point and government projects were typically built by politically connected corporations.

The program focused on what was then a novel idea: to seek out and hire the best talent. Organized by the General Services Administration, the agency that oversees government building projects, the program cut through some red tape and brought in teams of respected architects, planners and designers.

"Civic Spirit: Changing the Course of Federal Design," on view through Nov. 10 at the Center for Architecture in Manhattan, traces the history of that ambitious 10-year undertaking. The exhibition suggests what can happen when a government bureaucracy operates with a modicum of aesthetic awareness. Of the 19 projects in the show, many are first-rate; some rank among the great examples of American civic architecture — as important, in our day, as the neo-Classical monuments of a century ago.

But just as much of the work is second-rate. And what makes the show intriguing is how it exposes the obstacles to maintaining a high level of government architecture in this country today. Above all, there is the architect's struggle to maintain a spirit of democratic openness in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11. But the projects also point to a strain of provincialism in many local selection committees. The results are a potent expression of the battle to define the meaning of American democracy.

From the beginning, the show reveals how much has changed since Sept. 11, 2001. Three models of recent projects, surrounded by large photographs and architectural renderings, dominate the first floor. But the G.S.A. refused to release plans and sections of the buildings' interiors, out of fear that they could be used by terrorists. This is a considerable loss: it reduces the architecture to a superficial series of images.

Nonetheless, there is much to see here. The show opens with what may well be the program's crown jewel: Richard Meier's United States Courthouse and Federal Building in Central Islip, on Long Island. Depicted in a blazing white model, the sleek lines of the 12-story building's silhouette suggests a modern temple. Rows of delicate brises-soleil line the facades of the narrow structure that houses the main courtrooms. On one side, it is anchored by a towering white cylinder, which marks the courthouse's formal entrance. Together, these two forms frame a large concrete plaza.

Mr. Meier's best buildings are distinguished by their clarity, and here he can negotiate security concerns without disturbing the formal order of the composition. A long low barrier, for example, protects one side of the plaza, but it has an architectural meaning, gently guiding visitors to the main entry. Inside, the visitor's eye is drawn up along the cylinder's interior, where light spills down through a towering skylight. The building's forms have a Platonic purity that can be reassuring, even while evoking the tenuous rule of law in a society under siege.

This tension — between the desire to uphold core democratic values and a growing sense of instability — is explored more fully in a design by Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects for a federal courthouse in Austin, Tex. The building is conceived as an eight-story cube, its interlocking forms resting on a concrete base. Deep recesses set into the building create a magnificent play of light and shadow. That visual game continues inside, where the walls and walkways enclosing a lobby atrium dissolve into a cubist composition of intersecting planes. The lightness of the forms recalls the theoretical structures of Frederick Kiesler, the utopian who imagined weightless buildings suspended in air. But if you circle around to the back of the model, the upper floors begin to shift, setting the entire structure off balance.

By comparison, a district courthouse in Eugene, Ore., designed by Morphosis conveys a sense of careening into an uncertain future. The project's massive forms twist and shift as if they were breaking apart. Staircases weave their way up through the interior with dynamic force; shards of light shoot down into the interior. But the lighting casts a moody, "Blade Runner"-like vision of the future rather than civilization's steady climb to enlightenment. The message seems to be that our core institutions are not as stable as we think.

What unites all three designs is a yearning to maintain a spirit of openness in a time when security has become a catchword for restrictions on public access and freedom of movement. Aesthetics are only part of the equation.

The weakness of the other designs can be measured by their severity. The most disappointing is Antoine Predock's federal courthouse in El Paso, due in 2007. Mr. Predock is a talented architect known for creating often-haunting abstractions of traditional adobe structures. The main body of the courthouse is a towering gray block with a windowless cylinder rising out of its core. The structure's scale is meant to relate to the nearby mountains. But what is most striking about the building is its brutality: in its brooding monumentality, it evokes an enormous airless tomb.

An equally monstrous design, for a federal courthouse in Miami by Arquitectonica, is scheduled to be completed next year. The project is dominated by a massive eye-shaped form embedded in two towers at either end. A glass cone skylight is carved through the building's central atrium, but the building's graceless geometric forms are clumsily executed. The skylight seems derived from the more elegant structural tubes that pierce Toyo Ito's celebrated Sendai Mediatheque building in Japan.

Other projects are simply ill conceived, like the Perkins & Will design for a courthouse in downtown Los Angeles. The design, rising 17 stories, looms over the nearby City Hall. The building's L-shaped form frames a gigantic curved glass-and-steel mesh wall whose bladelike upper edge slices into the air. The wall, facing southeast, has undergone various revisions. In its current incarnation, it exists as a kind of decorative afterthought — something that looks as if it could blow away in a strong wind.

It is a commonplace among architects, of course, to blame bureaucrats when a government-sponsored project turns out badly. But the exceptional beauty of some of these projects makes that argument harder to sustain. Clearly the learning curve has been steep for the G.S.A. One difficulty is that its power is limited: its main task is to identify the planners, architects and academics who evaluate a project's architectural merits. Local selection committees make the final decisions.

It is a slow, painstaking process, and the committees are not always up to the task. What's more, their choices are often shaped by longstanding American cultural prejudices. The G.S.A. has yet to hire a single foreign architect since the "Excellence" program got under way.

By comparison, the cultural monuments that rose in Paris in the 80's, the rebuilding of Berlin after reunification and the early years of Beijing's construction boom all involved a wide range of international talent. Whatever one thinks of the results, they promoted a level of cultural discourse that has significantly raised the bar for contemporary architecture in general.

It is unlikely that the federal building program will reach its aesthetic goals without casting its net further. The ranks of great living American architects, sadly, are too thin.

Ultimately, the failure to harness foreign talent is rooted in a fear of the Other. That provincialism only threatens to widen as Americans adapt to the repercussions of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror. Alarmingly, it may shape the government's future architectural identity as much as the ambitions of a few idealists on the federal payroll. □