

The Washington Post

Winning on Appeal

Old City Hall's Expansion to Accommodate Courthouse Is Anchored by Modernist Atrium

By Philip Kennicott
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, June 17, 2009

For 10 years, the building once known as Old City Hall has sat idle. At the south end of Judiciary Square, it is a subtle, humble presence: If you don't look twice and pause to admire the simplicity of its arched windows and Ionic portico, it blends into the city's stone and concrete background.



But Old City Hall, which will be rededicated today as the new home of the District Court of Appeals, is one of the city's most venerable buildings, and one of its most storied. Begun in 1820, and expanded over the years, it helped define a fashionable and socially lively part of town in the early 19th century. It not only served as District's first city hall, but also as the site of some of the most dramatic court trials of that era.

To accommodate the Court of Appeals, established by Congress in 1970 as the city's highest court, the building has been renovated and successfully expanded with a sexy glass box atrium on the north side. Ugly street-level parking has been removed and placed underground. A new landscape has been introduced that not only flatters the building but also makes it accessible to people who have disabilities. The interior has been renovated as well, including a new underground courtroom large enough to handle the bar ceremonies over which the Court of Appeals presides.

The decision to place the Court of Appeals in the historic structure was mostly pragmatic. It freed up space in the grim Moultrie Courthouse, dreaded by all District residents as the site of biennial jury duty. The Moultrie building is configured to deal with the usual three-part circulation of a standard courthouse, with separate spaces for the public, the judges and the prisoners. The Court of Appeals doesn't deal directly with prisoners, so it made sense to move it into the smaller, more historic space.

But there is an emotional appeal to its new home, as well.

"The history of this building made this, in my opinion, a perfect home for the highest court in the District of Columbia," said Chief Judge Eric T. Washington. And what a history it has had.

After Sam Houston used his cane to clobber a congressman in 1832, he was tried and convicted in the building for a "great outrage upon the public peace." It was here that a would-be assassin of Andrew Jackson was acquitted by reason of insanity in 1835, and the successful assassin of James A. Garfield was convicted in 1882. The building provided offices for Frederick Douglass when he served as a U.S. marshal and for Theodore Roosevelt when he was commissioner of the civil service in the late 19th century. And because it was the site of several trials in a notorious fugitive slave case -- the "Pearl" affair, in which abolitionists attempted to sail more than 70 slaves up the Chesapeake Bay to safety -- it is listed on the National Park Service's National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

The building is just as deeply engaged with architectural history. Its first designer, George Hadfield, was one of a string of architects who did early work on the U.S. Capitol. More significantly, he designed Arlington House, now known as the home of Robert E. Lee, standing sentinel among the graves of Arlington National Cemetery. That makes it a curious counterpart to the National Building Museum at the north end of Judiciary Square, which was designed by Montgomery C. Meigs in 1887. It was Meigs, who as a Union Army quartermaster general, decided to start burying Union dead in the yard of Lee's old mansion.

The glass atrium is a prominent addition to the space between the two historic structures, and far from diminishing them, its gentle dissonance enhances the dignity of the somewhat cluttered square, which is also home to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial.

The square glass box is a bit like the little black dress: elegant, never out of fashion and appropriate almost anywhere. Architecturally, it is one of the best things about the renovation. It repositions the entrance of the building from the south to the north side, where the courthouse is elegantly flanked by two lesser and later court buildings.

The atrium is a rare, almost pure modernist gesture in a city where large public architecture generally tends to heaviness, compromise and bland decoration. A few blocks away, the glass box of Mies van der Rohe's Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library is feeling vindicated.

The basic lines of the new atrium work so well in front of the old courthouse that one wonders if architect Hany Hassan took more pains than necessary to contextualize it. Hassan, of Beyer Blinder Belle, says he "felt strongly that this addition should be of its own time."

But he also wanted to echo the older building's rhythms. Until around 1917, there had been a second, north-facing Greek-style portico where Hassan's glass box now sits. It was removed during a renovation from 1917 to 1919 -- one of several major changes to the building over its history -- and the box recalls its proportions. Its six front-facing support columns are drawn out away from the glass wall so that they read like classical columns.

It's an elegant, respectful gesture, but once you begin overthinking a glass cube, you almost inevitably end up reducing its minimalist power. A great concern for transparency was always a part of the project, says Judith Robinson of Robinson & Associates, a historical survey firm that studied the site in preparation for its renovation. But Hassan's columns, and the horizontal cross structure that holds the glass in place, limit see-through. The pavilion becomes more monumental, and loses some of the inexhaustibly appealing miracle of pure glass.

It's a small thing, and the box is transparent enough that the irony of its primary function -- as an atrium for security -- is still poignant. Security is given its unfortunate, symbolic due: It is the first and foremost architectural concern, the space that precedes all other spaces.

The reorientation of the building has two other effects. On the inside, it helps make sense of the building's multiple levels. But Hadfield's magnificent south portico is now purely ornamental. From the beautifully renovated interior central hall, a doorway that exits onto the grand old porch is now triggered with an alarm. Unless you walk around to what is now the "back" of the building, and ascend its purely decorative staircase, you'll never realize that it has one of the most interesting views in downtown Washington.

From the Mall, looking back at the old courthouse, the view is even more impressive (especially in

winter when the leaves are down), with the relatively modest Hadfield building surmounted by the massive roof of the National Building Museum. It looks like a little Acropolis, a striking contrast to the denatured and bland civic architecture that surrounds it.

Hadfield's city hall has been so often changed over the years that no one can feel a glass box violates its historical integrity. It has been preserved not as a relic, but as a functioning piece of civic architecture that will once again witness the minutiae of our legal quibbling. The public will even have some minimal access to the building, with a large open hall on the lower floor used for exhibition space and other public functions.

On Indiana Avenue, on the building's south side, a historical marker recalls the glory days of Old City Hall, when Washington's streets flowed with mud and muck. It includes a picture that shows the structure with a dome that was never built and it notes that the building is empty and awaiting a new use by the District of Columbia. It's happy news to report that this marker is now out of date.

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