



New Paradigms: European Courts

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In a recent visit to French, Belgian, European and international courts, the distinct differences between the European and American approaches to providing facilities for the justice system were clearly evident, as were the similarities – most notably, the common challenge for the courts to keep pace with a fast-changing multicultural society grown increasingly more reliant upon the legal system to resolve disputes at scales from domestic to international.

The new expansion of European Court of Justice, now under construction in Luxembourg, is a prime example of this mushrooming of purview, where a court that once served 6 nations will now serve the 27 countries of the European Union, with transcripts to be translated into 23(!) official languages. Of its 2000 employees, over 1000 are interpreters or translators, an enormous bureaucracy to communicate the proceedings of intramural disputes in the EU, but surely less costly than the wars that have consumed the continent throughout its history. Indeed, a continuing theme throughout these courts is the need to provide for the many different languages spoken by the people in the system.

At the scale of the regional or local courthouse, it has been noted by a number of American designers), including Thom Mayne, Harry Cobb and Richard Meier most prominently, that the essential problem of the large courthouse is that the courtroom becomes buried in the web of separated circulation systems and loses its ability to be perceived as the figural element in the building composition. As the courtroom is obscured by the poche of associated support spaces, its significance is consequently diminished, and the opportunity to communicate a statement of transparency in the judicial system is lost. The sense of the courtroom housing a process that is visible and accountable to its community morphs to one where the process occurs solely within the domain of the bureaucracy that is responsible for administering it, with reduced opportunity for the public to view, understand and accept the validity of its outcomes.

In noteworthy attempts to address this dilemma, Thom Mayne's Eugene Courthouse pairs the courtrooms as towers linked by undulating ribbons of circulation, and with only four courtrooms is able to achieve their formal expression, albeit in highly abstracted form. In his Islip and Phoenix courthouses, each with over twenty courtrooms, Meier is able to free only one courtroom from the block of the building, and proposes that courtroom as the symbol for the processes taking place in the other two dozen courtrooms. Cobb, after eloquently stating the case for restoring the courtroom to its figural place, is only able to make the entrance doors visible to the public realm in his Boston courthouse.

In the French and Belgian courthouses of Richard Rogers and Bernard Kohn, this conflict between figure and its necessary accretions is resolved in ways that stand in sharp contrast to current practice in the US. The expressive potential of the courtroom as symbol of an exalted process is exploited to perhaps its highest potential in Rogers's Bordeaux courthouse where the seven courtrooms are fully revealed as separate elevated objects. The inventive power of the scheme lies in the clarifying simplicity of its organization: the essence of the courthouse is reduced to two elements, courtrooms and administrative block, each set on opposing plinths and united by a hovering roof plane. The courtrooms are expressed as highly sculptural wooden vessels, set in contrast to the mute neutrality of the glass office block. Freed from the enveloping crust of support spaces typical of the American courthouse typology, each courtroom is a discrete monument announcing the building's purpose and meaning, without need of an intervening architectural overlay. The circulation elements that connect to the courtrooms – open bridges and stairs - emphasize the separation of the bureaucratic elements of the court from the courtroom, implying that all who enter the room do so openly and equally, without special advantage.

This perception may have special meaning in a French court, where judges participate in both the investigations and the jury deliberations, in a system that prioritizes the pursuit of justice over the protocol of due process as found in American and English courts.

In a more recent courthouse in Antwerp, Belgium, Rogers is able to maintain the dominant expression of individual courtrooms at the scale of a major urban courthouse, with over 30 courtrooms that announce their presence with soaring metal roof structures to capture light and dynamically shape each courtroom. The extensive program of administrative space is organized into two opposing sets of three wings linked by a glazed central hall. The slender fingers of offices set into the landscape bring daylight and natural ventilation to all the workspaces and are part of a sophisticated sustainability strategy typical of Rogers' practice. Like Bordeaux, the plan is characterized by an elemental clarity that reduces the complex program to its essence – central hall, office wings and courtrooms. The transforming invention here is that all the courtrooms are placed on the roof above the three story plinth of offices, exalting their position symbolically and freeing them in section to be boldly and sculpturally expressed. Unlike Bordeaux, and perhaps more instructive from the perspective of US practice, the plan of the courtroom floor is somewhat more conventional, with shared meeting rooms embedded between the courtrooms, yet without inhibiting their individual expression.

These themes were first explored by Rogers in his European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France. The two courtrooms are expressed as metal clad drums flanking a central public hall with an open stair and elevator adding drama to the processional ascent to the courtroom. The office wings of the judge offices are organized as long slender bars as in Antwerp, allowing for ample day lighting and natural ventilation opportunities.

Bernard Kohn's finely crafted Montpellier courthouse recently constructed in the south of France represents a very different expression of the courthouse program. Utilizing the formal strategies and material vocabulary of his mentor Louis Kahn, the architect created a courthouse that successfully operates as urban infill within a dense medieval city, yet results in a

building with the courtrooms articulated as figural elements, animated with abundant daylight and unified with clear and generous circulation. Although similar to Bordeaux in the plan relationship of object-courtrooms to administrative offices, this stone-clad concrete building takes a different view of the role of the courthouse in the city, eschewing monumentality and Bordeaux's exuberant expressionism for a more casual civility, perhaps consistent with its Mediterranean context. Expressed as a consistent horizontal mat of three stories, the building presents a finely scaled urban courtyard as its offering to the city, leaving the individual courtrooms to be expressed only upon entering the building.

The many examples of new French and European courthouses represent ambitious architectural projects that express a contemporary sensibility while often retaining traditional formal expressions of procession and monumentality. While many of the differences between these and American courthouses can be attributed to programmatic variances resulting from dissimilar judicial systems, the forward looking, and even experimental nature of the architecture is in marked contrast with the contextual designs characteristic of most American public buildings. These designs are the product of a system primarily based on open competitions that tend to reward designs that push the envelope of possibility.

The GSA Design Excellence notwithstanding, American public building design tends to be heavily conditioned by the taste of public officials loathe to offend the sensibilities of an electorate often hostile to modern architecture. The challenge to designers to express the dignity and authority of the judiciary, while still communicating a contemporary sense of accessibility to the process parallels the architectural challenge of expressing these values in a building that speaks of our time.

Slideshow of the New Paradigms: European Courthouses Presentation

This research was done as part of a tour of European courts organized by the [Court of the Future Network](#). The Court of the Future Network is putting on another [court architecture tour](#), this time in Victoria from 23-26 March 2009. The tour is a Justice Environments conference over four days, with the debates and discussions taking place on the relevant sites, together with local court staff. Issues will include indigenous justice and neighbourhood justice, security, funding, and use of video technology.

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