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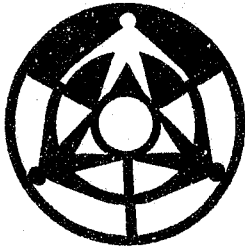
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THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

CRIMINAL COURTS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROJECT

Institute for Advanced Studies in Justice

The American University Law School

Washington, D.C.

A Program of the
Office of Regional Operations
(Adjudication Division)
Law Enforcement Assistance Administration
U.S. Department of Justice

CRIMINAL COURTS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROJECT

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Caroline S. Cooper, Deputy Director
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ASSISTANCE TO THE JEFFERSON
COUNTY, TEXAS CRIMINAL DISTRICT
COURT IN THE PLANNING FOR RENOVATION
AND EXPANSION OF ITS
EXISTING COURT FACILITY

NCJRS

NOV 15 1977

ACQUISITIONS

SEPTEMBER 1977

CONSULTANT:

MICHAEL A. BIGNELL, A.I.A.

CRIMINAL COURTS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROJECT
The American University Law Institute
4900 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 200016
(202) 686-3903

This report was prepared in conjunction with The American University Law School Criminal Courts Technical Assistance Project, under a contract with the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In February 1977, the Chief Judge of the Criminal District Court of Jefferson County in Beaumont, Texas, Judge Larry Gist, requested LEAA technical assistance through the Texas State Planning Agency for the purpose of obtaining expert guidance in the design of a renovation plan for the existing court facility.

Over the past few years, the Jefferson County Courts have been experiencing overcrowded conditions as its caseload increased. In June of 1977, a bond issue was passed by the voters of the county, allocating approximately \$450,000 for Courthouse expansion and renovation. Following this, the court retained a local architectural firm, the White, Budd and Van Ness Partnership to design courthouse renovation plans. The court and the architects, however, felt that it would be beneficial to obtain an outside expert's opinion to guide them in their decision making.

Judge Gists' request, which was forwarded through LEAA channels to the Criminal Courts Technical Assistance Project at the American University Law Institute identified three priority areas for technical assistance. These were: the design plan for new courtrooms on a proposed upper floor addition; a renovation design for existing courtrooms and offices; and, a design for a new courthouse security system. The architects had begun developing design plans in all of these areas prior to the consultant's site work.

The consultant who was selected to provide this assistance was Mr. Michael A. Bignell, A.I.A., an architect in private practice in Annapolis, Maryland who has extensive experience in courthouse design and courts space management analysis. Following a review of pertinent materials supplied by the court, Mr. Bignell spent two days

on site in Jefferson County in early August. During this time, he met with Judge Gist, Randy Kitchens, the Criminal District Court Coordinator, the architects, other judges, key county department heads and staff of the Southeast Texas Regional Planning Commission.

Mr. Bignell's analysis and recommendations are contained in the following report.

II. EXISTING CONDITIONS

A. Growth and Change in the County and Their Relationship to Court Facility Needs

In the past several years Jefferson County and the City of Beaumont have not experienced the major changes in population size or demography that some other Texas jurisdictions, such as Harris County and the City of Houston, have faced, furthermore, review of the 1978 Regional Comprehensive Criminal Justice Plan I, shows that for the foreseeable future, no major changes are anticipated in the population mix, size or economic base of the County. The principal changes that have occurred in the last few years include the depreciation of the central business districts, along with a general decline in the quality, socio-economic base, and the urban fabric in these areas. It should be noted, however, that in the past 20 years, there have been clear increases in the incidence of drug-related offenses and violent crime, but, as compared with many other jurisdictions, Jefferson County represents a gradually changing, but comparatively stable environment, insofar as the demand for County Court facilities and related functions are concerned.

B. Conditions in the Existing County Courthouse

The existing Courthouse structure was built in the early 1930's and is a well preserved architectural facility of that period. The existing larger courtrooms and most of the lobbies and public spaces are in general functional, dignified environments and have stood up well to nearly 50 years of use. One the whole, the building has been well maintained.

Various support areas, such as judges' chambers and related staff areas, however, are overcrowded and have been designed in a makeshift manner. For example, the judges chambers lack adequate conference facilities and affords little privacy. In response to demands for increased space, some of the court functions have been located outside of the Courthouse complex.

It is also clear that the Courthouse building would not meet many of the current modern building code provisions or life-safety standards with respect to fire and escape facilities.

The worst conditions at the facility, however, are found on the upper jail floors, where currently 230-250 inmates occupy spaces designed for half that number, and 4-5 men are housed in cells designed for two persons. Also, this part of the facility is not air conditioned, further worsening the conditions.

It is clear that general requirements for growth and change in the facility, particularly for new courtrooms, with attendant support spaces and other growing County functions, can no longer be met within the confines of the existing structure. For example, a new criminal court is now required. In order to assist in assessing space needs for the new court facility development program, and to aid the Commissioner's Court in acquiring additional land for expansion purposes, the architects have prepared some diagrams of the potential floor plan layouts for the complex. In summary, these proposals consist of:

- Retaining the existing structure of the Courthouse and the public entrance, as well as the major courtroom areas.
- Placing all courtrooms and immediate support functions on the second floor.
- Building a new County Sheriff and Jail facility as part of the complex.
- Removing prison facilities from the existing Courthouse tower, leaving these for use as general dead-storage areas.
- Creating some expansion space in the existing Courthouse, and generally restoring its original graceful entrance and hallway areas by removing partitions which have been built out into these areas.
- Bringing the existing Courthouse building up to code, with improved fire stairs and general life-safety standards.

These general development guidelines are sound, and should be used as the basic framework for the final improvement program at the facility.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to prepare the detailed space analysis and development program for the facility, a series of decisions have to be made by the various users and also by the Commissioners Court. These decisions should be made jointly with the architects and be recorded in a space and functional program document to be prepared by the architects and used by them as parameters in developing the final design and construction cost analysis for the facility. In preparing the final space analysis document, the following major elements should be addressed:

A. Courtrooms

From projected caseloads, the number and type of courtrooms should be assessed, and a reasonable factor added for future expansion. In order to assist the County, Judiciary and the design team to decide on courtroom layout and space standards, it is recommended that they visit the following courtrooms:

- a. District of Columbia Superior Court, Model Courtroom (3).
- b. The newly constructed court facility Cleveland, Ohio.

(The latter facility has carefully segregated circulation patterns, separating the public, judges and prisoners throughout the complex.)

B. Courtroom Support Facilities

These include Judges Chambers for which adequate space should be provided for conducting conferences in chambers. They should be arranged so that the judge can enter and leave the chamber without being confronted by the public, press, or attorneys on his way to the courtroom. Access to the Judges Chambers should be controlled by their secretaries.

Other items included in this category are the prosecutor's library and conference facilities which should be placed as closely to the courtroom

as possible, and should be arranged as office type space. In the anticipation that growth will occur in this department, in relation to the expected growth in the whole court facility, expansion space should be planned for.

C. County Office and Court Related Functions

This includes clerk and records and related functions. It was noted by the consultant during the site visit, that the conversion of court records from dockets to microfilm was well advanced, thereby reducing the demand for large amounts of additional floor space for record keeping purposes.

In view of the high volume of traffic in these offices, they should be placed near the courtrooms, but arranged so that non-court related public circulation can occur without restricting access or causing congestion to the courtroom entrances.

D. Circulation in the Facility

This is a topic that needs addressing as a matter of priority. The basic idea of providing heavily used public circulation facilities on the lower floors of the facility is sound, as it is easier to provide large scale public circulation on a horizontal pattern than in a vertical pattern. It is recommended that in areas where the public might gather, such as outside courtrooms, the public corridors be expanded to private seating areas. This airport-type use of space not only provides a functional requirement, but also breaks up and humanizes long corridors.

It has been noted as a recommendation the judges should be provided with separate access and circulation to their chambers from the exterior of the facility. The provision should also be extended to other elected officials.

It is strongly recommended that a limited amount of assigned parking be provided, at least for the publicly elected officials located in the court facility. Some jurisdictions also provide parking for witnesses as a convenience to them when they are called to testify at trial.

To assure prisoner security throughout the facility, a separate circulation system should be provided from the exterior to the Jail and to the criminal courtrooms, which should have holding facilities adjacent.

E. Jury Facilities

In planning the Jury Assemblyroom and related jury facilities, it is recommended that attention be given to the environment that can be provided for the jury. The concept of providing a simple, austere seating area for the jury has been discussed in many jurisdictions and efforts have been made to provide an interesting environment where long periods of waiting need not be such a grueling experience. (4)

F. Safety and Security

In order to maintain safety and security at the facility during periods of social unrest or when controversial trials occur, it should be possible to restrict public access to the facility to the minimum number of controlled access points. In planning the facility, this prospect should be anticipated and arrangements should be made to lock off most of the public access doorways, and the potential introduction of guards should be provided for.

The above guidelines should be summarized in the final space and functional program document which should show projections of personnel and space requirements for the years 1990-2000 based on best estimates from each department and function in the facility.

IV. SUMMARY

The principle functions of this Technical Assistance visit were to review decisions made to date, and to make recommendations on some of the major elements of the new facility, such as courtrooms, judges' chambers, public circulation and so forth. As is noted in this report, the consultant felt that the design team had made good decisions as to placement of the main elements of the design, and that study visits to two recently completed facilities would be beneficial in assessing space needs and design standards in the new Courtrooms.

It is further recommended that a Building Committee be established. This Committee should be composed of representatives of the County Commissioners, the Judges, the D. A., County Clerk and so forth. This should assist the architects as they prepare the final space analysis document and prepare their designs for the facility.

In many respects, the Jefferson County Facility will serve as an example to other jurisdictions which have similar older courthouses, the lives of which can be extended by means of skillful restoration and the addition of new facilities adjacent to the original structures.

V. NOTES

1. 1978 Regional Comprehensive Criminal Justice Plan for Southeast Texas Regional Planning Commission Region 15.
2. For standards and design guidelines, see "Space Management and the Courts" - Design Handbook by F. Michael Wong, Ph. D., US SPO 1973 pp. 50-65.
3. For details of this facility, see "District of Columbia Superior Courtroom Evaluation" National Clearing House for Criminal Justice Planning and Architecture.
4. See National Clearing House for Criminal Justice Planning and Architecture "Tulsa-Oklahoma Found Space for Jury Assembly".