





PHYLLIS KING

## *the future of* **modern**

*federal architecture in an era of change*

*by meghan hogan*

**WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT THE RENOVATION OF A** courthouse entry pavilion—one of thousands across the nation—could cause so much trouble? In the midst of a project to expand security screening at Denver’s Byron G. Rogers Federal Building and Courthouse, the U.S. General Service Administration, the structure’s owner, got a surprise. Local preservationists didn’t want the Neo-Formalist façade altered. Considered one of the city’s best examples of mid-century modernism, they wanted it preserved just the way it was, warts and all. So GSA took a second look at the 5-story courthouse—and the 18-story office building linked to it—eventually coming up with a design to save some of the character-defining features. But the agency sensed itself facing a bigger problem. The complex was only one of over 550 modernist-era federal properties fast approaching the 50-year mark, when buildings can be officially considered “historic”—and if noteworthy listed in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as national historic landmarks. “The implications were significant,” says Rolando Rivas-Camp, director of GSA’s Center for Historic Buildings. What was noteworthy, and what was not? With some of the structures already in dire need, how to balance maintenance and historic integrity? What does the future hold for these buildings, so synonymous with the era of America’s rise to global leadership?

**LEFT:** *The James A. McClure Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Boise, Idaho. Built on pilotis, a modernist trademark, the white concrete structure appears to float.*

## Modernism was a salute to the postwar era

such as Mies van der Rohe, Eero Saarinen, and Philip Johnson. At the height of its popularity, the sweeping



THESE WERE JUST SOME OF THE QUESTIONS THAT GSA—OFTEN CALLED THE nation's largest landlord, with jurisdiction over 330 million square feet of federal office space—had to confront. While answers have not been easy, that has not stopped the quest, which last year earned an award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Trust praised GSA for its “strong foundation for the sensitive stewardship of federally owned buildings.” The honor was notable, with the agency one of only 20 awardees chosen from a field of almost 200. “The award was an easy one,” says Valecia Crisafulli, director of the Trust’s Center for Preservation Leadership, lauding the longevity of the 10-year initiative, which commenced by convening 75 of the nation’s top architects and preservationists at “Architecture of the Great Society: Assessing the GSA Portfolio of Buildings Constructed During the 1960s and 1970s,” a forum held in 2000. “We knew we had 100 million square feet of office space needing to be updated,” says attendee Ed Feiner, GSA’s former chief architect.

The group wasted no time, producing recommendations in just two months. Grouped into four categories, they called for an inventory of the buildings, criteria to evaluate architectural excellence, policy to guide preservation, and public outreach.

*Growth, Efficiency, and Modernism: GSA Buildings of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s*, a handsome volume published as part of the outreach effort, detailed the challenges—and potential solutions—painting a portrait of America ascendant at mid-century. In many ways, it is the story of modernism itself.

IN ITS DAY, THE STYLE WAS APPLAUDED AS THE FACE OF THE FUTURE BY SOME and reviled for destroying human-friendly streetscapes by others. Yet few would argue its place in history. Indeed, the style is enjoying a resurgence, with some of today’s cutting-edge federal buildings picking up where their predecessors left off.

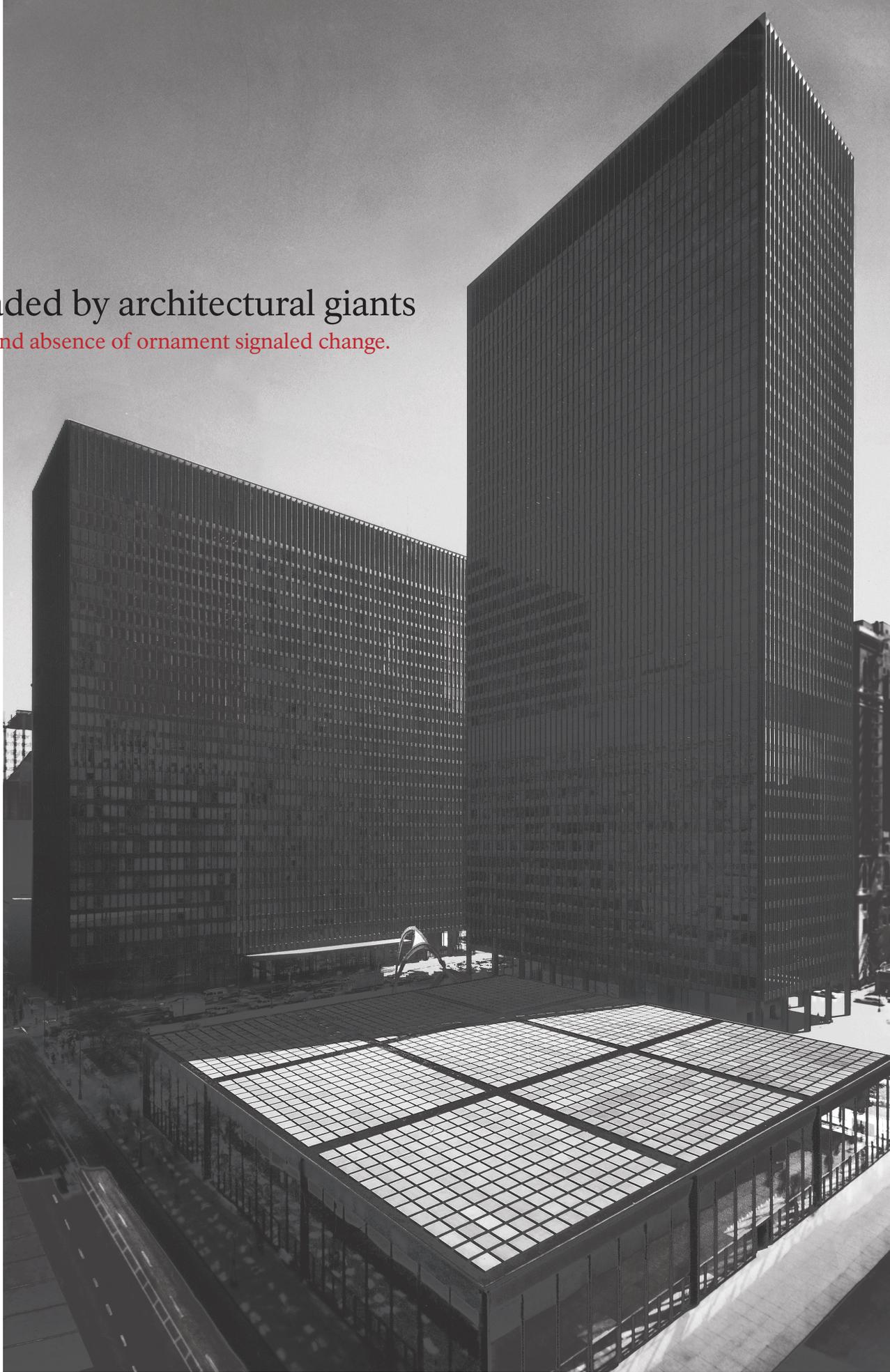
Modernism was a salute to the postwar era itself, spearheaded by architectural giants such as Mies van der Rohe, Eero Saarinen, and Philip Johnson. At the height of its popularity, the sweeping curves, sheets of glass, and absence of ornament signaled change. “Architects hoped that the machine age would bring about equality and democratic values for all citizens,” says *Growth, Efficiency, and Modernism*. The sentiment was echoed by President John F. Kennedy, writing in an issue of the *AIA Journal*: “The art and design of changing cities aims not only at providing better homes and community facilities, more efficient transportation and desirable open spaces, but also a setting in which men and women can fully live up to their responsibilities as free citizens.”

Kennedy took note of the sorry state of federal architecture on his very first day in office—January 20, 1961—as he rode down Pennsylvania Avenue during the inaugural parade. He called the blighted and vacant stretch a “disgrace to the nation,” and soon formed the Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Office Space to evaluate the issue. The group’s “Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture” set a new vision for GSA. Written by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the principles said that buildings should convey the “dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the American government.” To that end, they should incorporate the highest architectural thought, avoid official style, and make quality site choice and development the first priority. Public art should enliven the streetscape, said the principles (later called the “standards”), which led to a wealth of sculptural delights from Alexander Calder’s painted steel *Flamingo* in Chicago’s Federal Center Plaza to Robert Maki’s *Trapezoid E* in front of Eugene, Oregon’s Federal Courthouse.

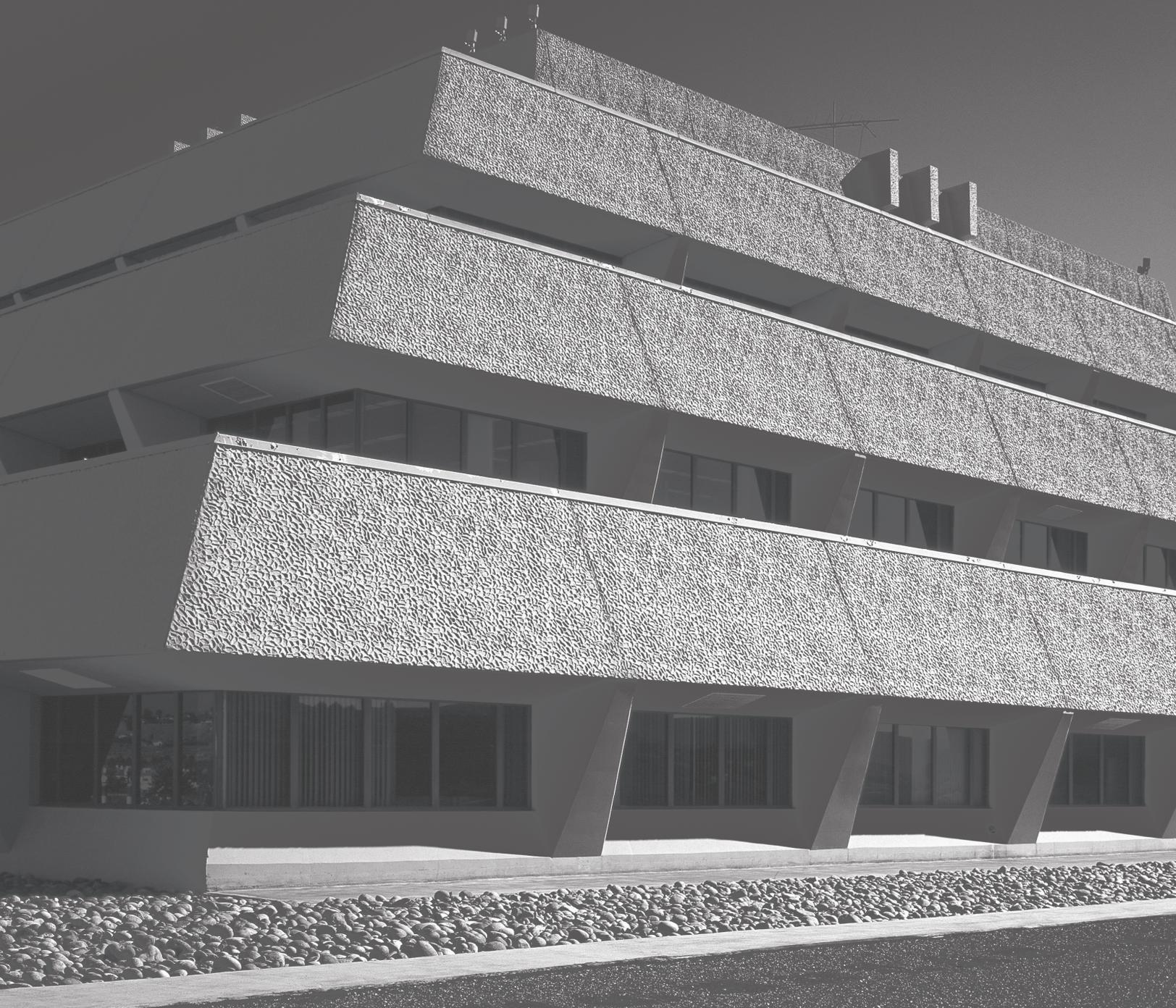
**RIGHT:** Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s steel-and-glass Chicago Federal Center, a three-building site including the U.S. Post Office Loop Station, the Everett M. Dirksen U.S. Courthouse, and the 42-story John C. Kluczynski Federal Building. **ABOVE:** Alexander Calder’s whimsical *Flamingo*, in the center’s plaza, a 50-ton painted steel sculpture that is part of GSA’s Art in Architecture program.

itself, spearheaded by architectural giants  
curves, sheets of glass, and absence of ornament signaled change.

LEFT GSA, RIGHT HEDRICH BLESSING



In its day, *the style was applauded as the face of the future by some and reviled for destroying human-friendliness*



CAROL M. HIGHSMITH PHOTOGRAPHY INC./GSA



streetscapes by others. Yet few would argue its place in history.

**THE “GUIDING PRINCIPLES” KICK-STARTED A FEDERAL CONSTRUCTION BOOM,** with major projects built in several cities simultaneously—a first for GSA, a young agency that had only been around since 1949. The last boom was in the 1930s, with around 1,300 structures constructed as part of the New Deal. That effort, under the auspices of the Supervising Architect’s Office, a Treasury Department division, largely relied on staff architects. Under the tenure of GSA Administrator Lawson B. Knott, Jr., almost 300 buildings sprang up from 1965 to 1969, with the square footage reaching a record 200 million. Designed not by staffers but by private architects under commission, some were indeed gems.

Boston’s John F. Kennedy Federal Building, designed by Walter Gropius, is one of the agency’s finest modernist monuments, with its sleek 26-story concrete and granite twin towers connected to a lower 4-story concrete and glass structure. Another is the Robert E. Weaver Federal Building in Washington, DC, built for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development—and one of Marcel Breuer’s signature accomplishments. The three-building Chicago Federal Center, constructed for GSA between 1960 and 1974, is also a masterwork, with architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s “less is more” philosophy apparent in the simplicity of the well-structured steel and glass ensemble.

Despite such jewels, not all of Kennedy’s dreams for federal architecture were realized. That is partly because, as *Growth, Efficiency, and Modernism* points out, the guiding principles were open to interpretation and “some interpretations were more successful than others.” The book provides an unflinching account of the blunders. Often structures were little more than worker warehouses, not environments built to boost morale and productivity. “GSA mid-century architecture when it was done well, was done very well, and when it was done badly, it was done very badly,” Feiner says.

One oft-critiqued edifice is Washington, DC’s J. Edgar Hoover Building, headquarters of the FBI. Designed in the Brutalist fashion by architect C.F. Murphy, it features a massive concrete overhang, today surrounded by various concrete bollards and planters, which some consider oppressive to the streetscape and a sad image of open government. Others say its well-sculpted mass would have worked better by itself, perhaps in a pastoral setting. The criticism highlights a problem with many modernist offerings—their inability to fit in. As *Growth, Efficiency, and Modernism* acknowledges, many structures were built in a style “that is massive, severe, and disengaged from its environment.”

As the 1960s moved into the 1970s, GSA did institute improvements, including the passing of the Public Buildings Cooperative Use Act in 1976, which allowed for retail space in federal buildings. But it was a dismal period for design, as standards deteriorated under the pressure to cut costs. Inflation, the Vietnam War, and other factors overwhelmed the economy; building budgets were scrutinized and spending slashed. “It was like a cost accountant had run wild,” says Joe Valerio, a peer reviewer for current GSA projects and principal at the Chicago-based Valerio Dewalt Train Associates architecture firm. “The attitude was to get buildings up quickly for the lowest possible price.”

**LEFT:** *The Chet Holifield Federal Building in Laguna Niguel, California, a ziggurat-style edifice designed by William L. Pereira in 1971, is GSA’s third largest property.*

# Federal Modern Then

## International Style



- Absence of ornament
- Box-shaped
- Expansive windows
- Smooth walls
- Cantilevers

## Formalism



- Flat projecting rooflines
- High-quality materials
- Columnar supports
- Smooth walls
- Strict symmetry

## Brutalism



- Massive appearance
- Rough, exposed concrete
- Broad, expansive walls
- Deep recessed windows

## Expressionism



- Sweeping, curved rooflines and walls
- Nonexistent or minimal use of symmetrical or geometric forms
- Faceted, concave, or convex surfaces
- Arched or vaulting spaces

**ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT:** *Evidencing a range of style: the U.S. Post Office and Courthouse, Boise, Idaho; the David J. Wheeler Federal Building and U.S. Post Office, Baker City, Oregon; the U.S. Post Office and Courthouse, Rome, Georgia; the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Building, Washington, DC.*

**TODAY, THE SHODDY CONSTRUCTION AND EXPERIMENTAL MATERIALS OF THIS** recent past translate into maintenance costs in excess of what it takes to preserve GSA's older properties. "Unlike traditional historic buildings, these weren't constructed to last for centuries," Rivas-Camp says. "The philosophy of the modern movement, coupled with the rapid pace of changing technology, resulted in buildings with a typical lifespan of only 20 to 30 years."

In 1977, the shortcomings of the "principles" led to a hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Buildings and Grounds. Opinions differed on the problem, but the consensus was that GSA had taken a wrong turn somewhere. Then-AIA President John McGinty opined, "It was not necessarily the role of the federal government to be on the leading edge of technological innovations in architecture." Roy Knight, then Acting Director of the Architecture and Environmental Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, thought many designs were "sterile in appearance and unfriendly in image." *Washington Post* architecture critic Wolf Von Eckhardt said that the American people should get a chance to weigh in, since "federal buildings were built for public use." Yet all agreed that good design should not be sacrificed because of cost. "These buildings will be used for a long time," said Nicholas Panuzio, then Commissioner of GSA's Public Buildings Service.

So what to do with this legacy today? Foremost is tapping the best buildings as preservation candidates. Determining where a structure lands on the scale of architectural excellence involves a lot of questions, says Rivas-Camp. So GSA developed a sophisticated assessment tool—a checklist to help determine eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. It's already helped Breuer's HUD Building and Victor

Lundy's United States Tax Court Building get listed, with nominations for three more structures in the works—the Chicago Federal Center, Columbia, South Carolina's Strom Thurmond Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse, and Boston's John F. Kennedy Federal Building.

Most modernist properties won't rate as high as these, simply because they are unremarkable. However, the assessment tool is also evaluating them for ease of updating to meet today's energy standards. That's a plus given President Obama's economic stimulus package, with \$5.5 billion going to GSA's Federal Buildings Fund for retrofits and green construction to meet his promise to modernize 75 percent of federal buildings. "Some of the greatest opportunities for green building are in our existing building stock," says Jason Hartke, director of advocacy and public policy at the U.S. Green Building Council, the developers of LEED, used to certify environmental friendliness. "It's a multi-year process that will create jobs, save energy, and save billions of dollars," he says. Making modernist buildings green won't happen overnight, but the stimulus is "a tremendous down payment towards achieving that effort." The process has its challenges, says Rivas-Camp. "Buildings are not static, they need to develop and change to stay relevant and functional." At the same time, GSA doesn't want to lose an historic structure's character. Most important to that, he says, is staying true to the architect's design intent.

**RIGHT:** *The experimental George H.W. Bush Federal Building pushes the architectural envelope while making a nod to its mid-century modern predecessors.*

BELOW ©TIM GRIFFITH/ESTO

**Federal Modern Now** The Thom Mayne-designed George H.W. Bush Federal Building in San Francisco—with its allusions to Marcel Breuer's mid-century icon, the Whitney Museum—is one of the world's most environmentally friendly structures. Employees enjoy an environment with a sky garden, expansive lobbies, and natural light through 85 percent of the space, much of it cooled by a sophisticated outside ventilation system—no air conditioning.



Boston's John F. Kennedy Federal



# Building, designed by Walter Gropius, is one of the agency's

finest modernist monuments, with its sleek 26-story concrete and granite twin towers connected to a lower 4-story concrete and glass structure.



## ^ Federal Modern Now

The U.S. Food & Drug Administration regional headquarters in Irvine, California—by architecture firm Zimmer Gunsul Frasca—was designed partly around the idea of open space. Glass walls, which partition offices from labs, allow a clear view through the building. The exterior, clad in concrete, wood, and an abundance of glass, brings the outside in, affording employees a scenic view of the coastal wetlands adjacent to the building, part of the San Joaquin Freshwater Marsh Reserve. The structure pays tribute to the masterworks of California modernists like Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, which likewise embrace nature. “The visual and spatial permeability of the curved glass façade and the corridor behind it reflect significant changes in the FDA’s institutional image,” notes Raul A. Barreneche in his book *FDA at Irvine: Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Partnership*. “ZGF’s design suggests not a secretive, opaque bureaucracy, but a transparent, future-minded and open—within limits—institution.”

**TODAY’S FEDERAL BUILDINGS ARE BEING DESIGNED TO LAST A LIFETIME, SAYS GSA, with the most forward of the group clearly alluding to their mid-century counterparts. The allusions are more than visual. These structures are direct descendants of that era’s legacy.**

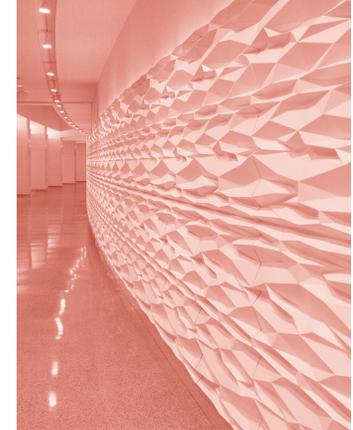
In 1990, GSA instituted a design awards program to acknowledge superior government architecture. Yet juries kept giving awards to structures built in the 1930s. When it came to the 1980s era, juries thought the buildings “should eventually ‘disappear,’” says Feiner. “That was part of the stimulus to change our ways.”

So GSA created a program called Design Excellence. Its goal was to change the face of government, encouraging a new generation of architects to build on, and surpass, what came before, avoiding the earlier pitfalls.

The program works through several stages. First, firms submit portfolios for advertised projects. Then a five-member panel, including a private sector architect listed in GSA’s National Register of Peer Professionals, evaluates the submissions. The panel shortlists qualified firms, deciding who will be asked to submit proposals and do interviews. The key to success is that the process uses a team of top-flight professionals, including architects, urban planners, and engineers, to review portfolios and designs. “You’re there to remind everyone to look at the bigger picture, when they might be looking at the trees instead of the forest,” says Valerio, one of the program’s 700 reviewers. As a result, today’s federal building commissions draw the architectural cream of the crop.

Creativity has flourished under the program, says GSA. Take the new U.S. Food & Drug Administration regional headquarters in Irvine, California (see sidebar, opposite). Both laboratory and administrative office, the sprawling compound weds science and design. Architecture firm Zimmer Gunsul Frasca designed the 133,000-square-foot complex partly around the idea of open space. Three two-story lab wings feature interchangeable modules allowing scientists, who test a quarter of the country’s imported food here, easy access to the different types of space they need. Another recent head-turner is San Francisco’s George H.W. Bush Federal Building, conceived by cutting-edge architect Thom Mayne and his firm, Morphosis (see sidebar, page 33), though reactions were mixed at the 18-story structure’s 2007 opening. The glimmering fin

**FAR LEFT:** The Walter Gropius-designed John F. Kennedy Federal Building, constructed between 1963 and 1966, in Boston, Massachusetts. **NEAR LEFT:** A U.S. Food & Drug Administration employee works quietly in one of the sunlit meeting nodes gathered at stairways throughout the new California regional headquarters, where workers enjoy views of both the marshy wetlands adjacent to the 10-acre site and the internal corridor that stretches the length of the entire complex.



## ^ Federal Modern Now

of a building certainly stands in high contrast to the Beaux Arts-style federal courthouse across the street. To the architecture community, it represents the tradition of postwar modernism at its best, a bold message that GSA isn't afraid to build buildings that shout out to passers-by. And people are definitely looking. "You can debate some of the issues about whether it relates, but what it really does is establish a presence that is forward-thinking," Feiner says. *New York Times* architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff said that the building "may one day be remembered as the crowning achievement of the General Service Administration's Design Excellence program." And not only do Design Excellence buildings stretch creativity, proponents say, their environments make employees happier and more productive. Workers indeed seem happy at the new \$331 million Skidmore, Owings and Merrill-designed Census Bureau

The 2007 Skidmore, Owings and Merrill Census Bureau complex, with its partial shielding of white oak brise soleil, looks more suited to a forest than to the urban outskirts of Washington, DC. The inside is anything but rustic, however. Employees are greeted by a stunning Jason Salovan-designed artwork blending multitudes of census data into a kaleidoscope of color, before entering a 1,100-foot-long corridor, aka "the Street." The hallway seems to wind on indefinitely, but a color theme breaks it into sections: red, blue, green, orange, yellow, and purple. "The vibrant color spectrum, progressing from violet at one end to red at the other, enlivens the space and establishes a clear sense of spatial hierarchy, which helps with wayfinding," says Stephen Apking, an SOM interior design partner who worked to make the place employee-friendly.

**"Some of the greatest opportunities for green building are in our** says Jason Hartke, director of advocacy and public policy at the U.S. Green Building Council, the developers of LEED, used to

Headquarters in Suitland, Maryland (see sidebar, right). For its opening, the Census Bureau Chorale came up with a song, "Some Enchanted Building"—a variation on the pop hit "Some Enchanted Evening"—to express their appreciation. "This work, under Design Excellence, has been honored by virtually every professional critic in the United States and has even been noticed by writers in Europe and Asia," writes Valerio in a *Chicago Life* article about the program.

Its effect stretches beyond GSA. New York mayor Michael Bloomberg implemented his city's Design + Construction Excellence Initiative to improve public works, and the U.S. State Department is considering a similar program in hopes of improving the unfriendly bunker-like quality of some of its embassies.

GSA is constructing a legacy for the years to come built on the legacy of years past. "Some of these buildings are the examples of this period," Feiner says. "They are the Mies van der Rohe, Saarinen, and Gropiuses of the future."

For further information about GSA's modernist buildings or to download a copy of *Growth, Efficiency, and Modernism*, go to [www.gsa.gov/federalmodernism](http://www.gsa.gov/federalmodernism). A pdf of GSA's follow-up publication, *Extending the Legacy*, is also on the site. The U.S. Green Building Council's website, [www.usgbc.org](http://www.usgbc.org), has a wealth of information on green building and LEED.

The bustle along "the Street" makes it feel like a small city, not just a come-and-go office building. An array of amenities—gym, convenience store, bank, day care, cafeteria—are all on site. There's also a state-of-the-art broadcasting and film editing studio. The Street's color code extends up eight floors, where 6,000 federal workers busily prepare for the 2010 census at workstations illuminated in natural light. Activity nodes—"wood boxes popping in and out of the main structure," says Apking—offer each division a quiet space for informal meetings or impromptu breaks. Green features such as underfloor air distribution and recycled materials helped earn the complex a silver LEED rating. The view from the roof peers out over the agency's old home, a phalanx of deteriorated 1940s-era office buildings—now being demolished—their cold exteriors a stark contrast to the wood-sheathed complex rising above them, a paean to SOM masterworks of mid-century.

**FAR LEFT:** The “auditorium pod” protrudes from the white oak exterior of the new SOM-designed Census Bureau complex. **MIDDLE LEFT:** Two shots inside the “activity nodes”—quiet seating areas for informal meetings or breaks. **NEAR LEFT:** A glance down the color-coded, 1,100-foot-long hallway, lined with decorative panels. **BELOW:** The Robert C. Weaver Federal Building, named after the country’s first African American cabinet member, was constructed for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in Washington, DC. Built between 1963 and 1968, it is considered by historians to be one of modernism’s most notable accomplishments.

FAR LEFT SOM, OTHERS ON THE LEFT EDUARD HUEBER/ARCHPHOTO.COM; BELOW BEN SCHNALL/COURTESY OF THE MARCEL BREUER PAPERS, 1920-1986, ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION



existing building stock,”  
certify environmentally friendliness.