

**ROMAN L. HRUSKA**

**UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE**

Omaha, Nebraska



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**In this grove, one can wander in the world  
of man and nature, and from here progress  
to the world of man and law.**

James Ingo Freed  
Architect, Pei Cobb Freed & Partners





## AN ICON OF JUSTICE

Omaha was founded in the mid-1850s, a lively hub of commerce on the Missouri River and the eastern terminus of the Union Pacific railroad, a key link in the nation's first transcontinental rail line. A century and a half later, the city has expanded its traditional economic base of farming and freight to include an impressive array of telecom and retail industries. In this modern age, people have also grown more conscious of the community's cultural foundations, renewing an appreciation for buildings in such styles as the Classical Revival and Chicago School and preserving this legacy alongside contemporary designs with a comprehensive historic preservation plan.

The new Roman L. Hruska United States Courthouse, serving the District of Nebraska, observes the active dialogue in downtown Omaha between the city's architectural past and present. The Hruska Courthouse stands in traditional fashion on a prominent hillside site in the city center with axial connections to the new Omaha Convention Center and the Douglas County Courthouse. In this context,

the courthouse is a significant feature of a civic precinct developed amid the commercial activity of downtown Omaha. The site stretches two blocks, bounded by 17th Street on the east, 19th Street on the west, Dodge Street on the north, and Douglas Street on the south. Generous in length, this setting has inspired an urban design that is open and public minded at the same time that it offers the opportunity for serene introspection.

Rigorous urban-scale refinements distinguish the low-rise courthouse in a neighborhood of high-rise buildings. The courthouse's massing emphasizes the gravity of its purpose, while thoughtful refinements integrate the building to the scale of the street. The plan of the 350,130-square-foot structure cleaves into four squared quadrants—defined on the exterior by sharply drawn reveals—that unite in the great circle of the atrium at the center.

The building's main entrance faces the middle of the site, overlooking a 39,000-square-foot plaza. Formerly a block of 18th Street, this space is paved in precast

concrete and granite with sitework details that echo the street's vestigial boundaries. From Dodge Street, pedestrians may walk up a broad stairway to the middle of the plaza, where a grove of 36 ginkgo trees constitutes an important design metaphor: chosen for their straight, sturdy trunks and sheltering canopy at maturity, the ginkgoes represent nature's humbling of humans as they proceed to the realm of the law.

On the courthouse's exterior, the brick cladding suggests the color of Indiana limestone, and the detailing supports the rational underpinnings of the building's parti—particularly the window details. The variety of window sizes and shapes on the north, south, and east facades (as well as their deviation in phrasing from that of the windows on the main west façade) serves as an overture to bring the scale of the building in line with the pedestrian experience. The fenestration of the main façade appears as grids within grids. Aluminum window frames form simple Greek crosses atop flush glazing. Taken together (with the exception of some blind windows concealing ceiling plenums or

columns), the patterns of window perforations represent a straightforward inscription of the spaces within.

Simple pilasters with corbelled brick capitals finesse the turns of exterior corners. Minor precast concrete bands define the cornice and form shallow arcs above monumental window groupings of the main façade. A faceted glass-and-curtain-wall entrance façade joins the two front quadrants behind the main entrance pavilion. The pavilion, cloistered between the two wings pushing forth from the west façade, reaches outward as if to embrace and shelter arriving visitors. It, too, serves to temper the building's scale. Four shallow steps up from the outer plaza modulate the transition between the flat, paved expanse and the vertical façade to usher the visitor into to the judicial sphere.

The understated dignity of the Hruska courthouse culminates in its most distinctive element, the four sculptural "petals" that float above the roof and provide shelter to the atrium. These metal-panel-clad petal formations, each of which extends out

from the center to cover part of one quadrant, also have great iconographic value. In their vertical composition, they become the “umbrella” of justice. In plan, they become the “books” of justice. Floating nearly 20 feet above the parapet, the petals distinguish the profile of the courthouse among the office towers and establish its monumental identity.

In the subtlety of its emblematic gestures, the Hruska courthouse assumes an avowedly modern character. The authority of its form projects the building into the larger cityscape as its graceful façades and details speak directly to people on the street, creating a design that works in stewardship of both the law and the city.



**Democracy and individual freedom are sometimes fragile things.... Gratefully, they have become our birthright and will be further nurtured by this new complex.**

Roman L. Hruska

U.S. Senator

Remarks at the Groundbreaking of

U.S. Courthouse Named in His Honor



## A RATIONAL INTERIOR ORDER

The procession to the entrance of the Hruska courthouse unfolds as a transition from the haphazard sphere of urban space to the carefully ordered realm of jurisprudence. On the interior, this experience extends all the way to the courts, as the journey becomes a narrative of a person's place before the law.

The courthouse's design resolves the dynamics of the program in a system of squares, in both plan and section, almost as if the building were the three-dimensional progeny of the Omaha street grid with its uniformly square blocks. The entrance sequence, however, enriches this geometry by making squared circles of the flared-roofed entry pavilion and the soaring atrium, invoking associations with the idea of a classical rotunda.

Just beyond the threshold where all public visitors move into the building, the bright, bursting expanse of the four-story atrium suggests enlightenment itself. Daylight pours from the skylights, which are set in the pattern of a Greek cross within the atrium's circle. Opposite the entrance, a ceremonial double staircase invites visitors

to the first courtroom level where, to either side of a central landing, the "Nebraska Grilles" metal sculptures—one of corn and goldenrod, the other of sunflowers and wheat—recall the mid-western landscape reaching upward towards the sun. Further in the building, the light reflects off the white-and-buff-colored terrazzo floor and brass inlay of the Great Seal of the United States, reaching deep into open hallways.

Spatially, the atrium unites the disparate quarters of the courthouse, both horizontally and vertically. Eight monumental columns surround the center volume, delineating the circle and creating an architectural screen in front of complex layers of stacked galleries that serve as courtroom waiting areas. Glass-trimmed bridges follow the curve of the space across the front of the building, complemented by glass panels lining the perimeter of the galleries along the atrium.

The courtrooms and related spaces complete the plan in a foursquare arrangement around the atrium, joined by stair towers and elevator cores. The courtrooms proper—along with the judges' chambers,

support offices, jury rooms, and counsel chambers that accompany each of them—are laid out efficiently and take maximum advantage of the site.

There are currently nine courtrooms in the building with three areas designated as future courtrooms. There are five District courtrooms, one Court of Appeals courtroom, two Magistrate courtrooms, and one Bankruptcy courtroom. Except for the Special Proceedings courtroom on the fourth floor, each is designed to accommodate District Court proceedings. All have interior finishes that place them in the tradition of the nation's finest judicial spaces. Most have dark-cherry paneling, marble door surrounds, coffered ceilings, and woven carpets. The exception is the Court of Appeals, which is paneled with bay oak and has a barrel-vaulted ceiling. Technologically, the courtrooms have the latest equipment and boast universal access.

Overall, a sense of sober restraint distinguishes the design of this courthouse as a modern expression of a classical tradition. A rigorous logic is apparent throughout the building—in its carefully calculated functional

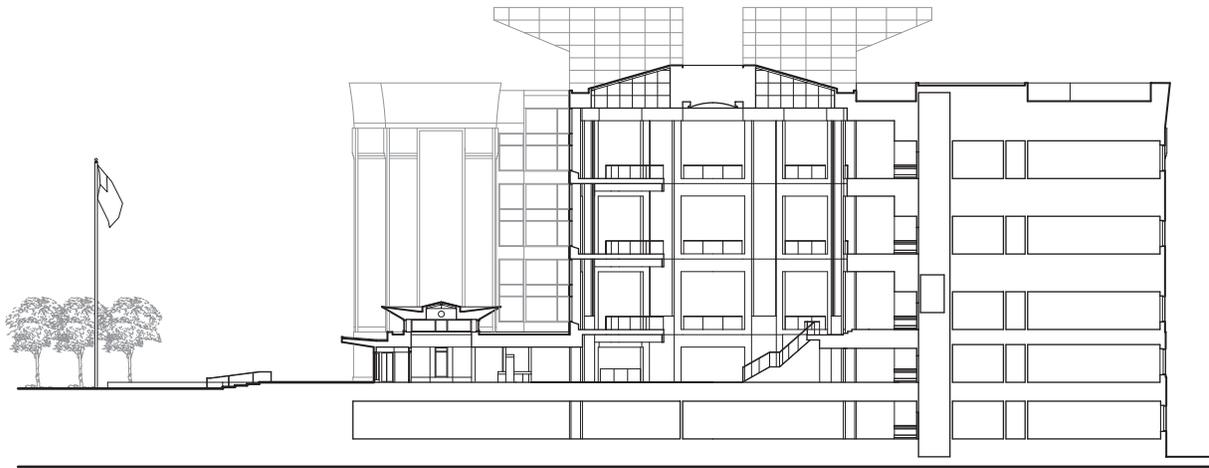
relationships and its dynamic spatial expressions. There is also a sense of high purpose in the scheme's details—details that flawlessly integrate materials and finishes and help resonate the principle that justice relies on reason to overcome transient passions.



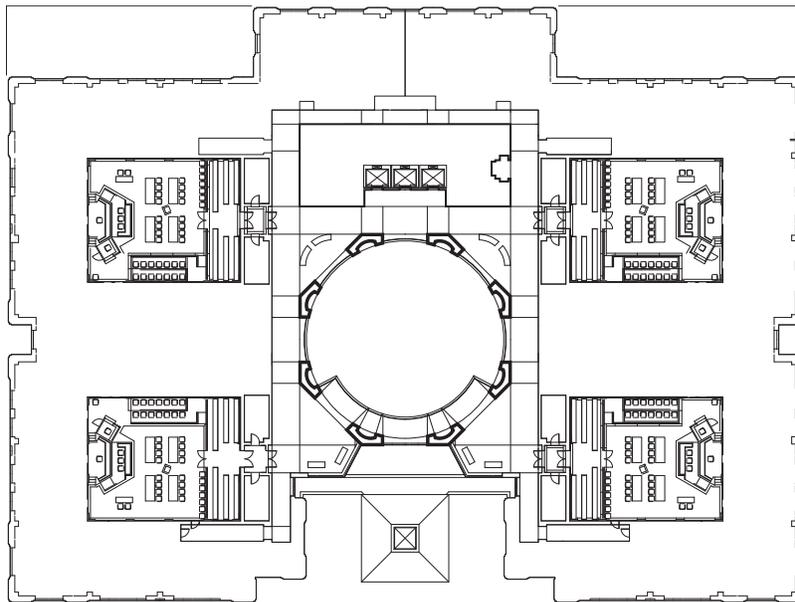


**We wanted to make the building  
receptive—not a hard-walled edge, but a  
more engaging series of experiences.**

James Ingo Freed  
Architect, Pei Cobb Freed & Partners



**Section**



**Courtroom Floor Plan**





## ART-IN-ARCHITECTURE

Art has always been an important feature of great architecture. One major work has been commissioned specifically for the Roman L. Hruska United States Courthouse.

### **Nebraska Grilles**

*Installed in the Great Hall above the Ceremonial Staircase*

Stephen Robin

Among the first images to strike visitors as they enter the atrium of the Roman L. Hruska United States Courthouse is a pair of exuberant cast-bronze grilles representing indigenous grains and flowers of Nebraska: corn, wheat, sunflowers, and goldenrod, the state flower. This agricultural imagery recalls the ornament of Nebraska's classic civic buildings, particularly that of the Art Deco-style State Capitol in Lincoln, and provides a naturalistic counterpoint to the atrium's rational geometry. Pulling forward in arcs from the concave column shafts atop the symmetrical ceremonial staircase, the grilles frame the central entrance portal. Each measures five feet, three inches wide and 22 feet high, reaching just beyond

the rails of the second level to draw the visitor's eye upward to the great height of the atrium. Daylight in this space illuminates the modeling of the grain and flower figures, which nod irregularly against strong vertical stalks. It is a piece with layered meanings where the asymmetrical details convey the sculptural nature of the work while the setting and overall composition evoke the traditions of architectural ornament.

FPO 73778.LRes



**Art in Architecture Program**

GSA's Art in Architecture Program commissions American artists, working in close consultation with the lead design architect, to create artwork that is appropriate to the diverse uses and architectural vocabularies of Federal buildings. These permanent installations of contemporary art for the nation's civic buildings afford unique opportunities for promoting the integration of art and architecture, and facilitate a meaningful cultural dialogue between the American people and their government. A panel composed of an art professional from GSA's National Register of Peer Professionals, an art professional from the city or region, the project's lead design architect, and individuals representing the Federal client, the community, and GSA provides guidance in selecting the best artist for each project.



## GENERAL FACTS ABOUT THE COURTHOUSE

The Roman L. Hruska United States Courthouse, completed in 2000, serves the District of Nebraska, the nation's ninth busiest Federal court. The building stands in downtown Omaha between 17th, 19th, Dodge, and Douglas Streets on land that slopes 35 feet from southwest to northeast or—in terms of the building's orientation—from approximately front to back. The courthouse's main entrance faces west, or uphill, so that what appears to be a four-story building reconciles the slope as a six-story building at the rear, or eastern, end above 17th Street.

The site, formerly occupied by three buildings, measures three and two-thirds acres. The City of Omaha contributed half a block of land plus a one-block length of 18th Street. This right of way is now the centerpiece of a 39,000-square-foot public plaza and a 1.4-acre outdoor parking area in front of the courthouse on its west side.

The 350,130-square-foot building has a conventional steel frame and rests on concrete pile caps supported by steel pipe friction piles. It rises four stories to a height of 79 feet above the plaza on the west. The “petal” formations above the skylight

on the roof are 19 feet eight inches from the base of the parapet. Above 17th Street on the east, the building's height reaches 109 feet as two additional floors fill the slope below the plaza level.

The lowest, or basement, level opens onto 17th Street and has five secure vehicle bays and one pedestrian service entrance, all protected by a line of bollards. The basement's south and west perimeter holds 53 parking spaces, with the balance of that level dedicated to processing and holding areas for defendants under U.S. Marshals' supervision. Above the basement, the concourse level houses the grand jury room, ancillary court functions, and other Federal offices.

On Level 1, the main public level, a secure entrance area leads into the building's large, daylit atrium. To the north of the lobby lie the offices of the Clerk of the Court and Pretrial Services. Offices for the Public Defender and the Clerk of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court lie to the lobby's south. Prospective jury members gather in an assembly room on the main level's northeast corner.

In its general plan, the building is a square divided into quadrants. In each quadrant, the typical courtroom floors on Levels 2, 3, and 4 have space for one courtroom plus the judge's chambers, private library, support offices, and jury rooms. Although the program includes 12 courtrooms, thus far nine have been realized: five District courtrooms (one of which serves as the Special Proceedings courtroom), one Court of Appeals courtroom, two Magistrate courtrooms, and one courtroom for the U.S. Bankruptcy Court. If expansion continues as anticipated through 2010, the design calls for two courtrooms in what is currently the Circuit library on the fourth floor and one in second-floor office space in the southeast part of the building.

Courtrooms open onto large public waiting areas that look over the building's atrium. The layout of courtrooms follows a time-honored template with the judge's bench on center opposite the entrance and the witness stand and jury box oriented toward the room's interior. Gallery benches flank a central aisle behind a railing and the well of the courtroom is furnished with tables for plaintiffs, defendants,

and their attorneys. The floor-to-floor heights of courtroom floors measure 19 feet eight inches.

The courthouse has three distinct circulation systems: one for the public, one for prisoners, and secure, dedicated corridors and elevators for judges and agency managers. All public visitors must use the main entrance on the plaza. The only time the public, the judges, and the detainees are together is inside a courtroom. Behind each courtroom lie three holding cells for detainees.

All courtrooms are equipped for access by people with disabilities, and also have white-noise machines, video security systems, integral computer networking, overhead projection, and teleconferencing capabilities for remote examination of witnesses and evidence.

Metric conventions were used to construct this courthouse.

**Location**

Downtown Omaha, between 17th, 19th, Dodge, and Douglas Streets.

**Size**

335,700 Gross Square Feet  
109 Feet High at 17th Street  
Six Floors, including Two Floors below the First Floor

**Time Frame**

Design Awarded: December 1994  
Project Planning Initiated: January 1995  
Concept Approved: August 1995  
Design Completed: November 1996  
Construction Starts: April 1997  
Substantial Completion: June 2000  
Dedication: October 24, 2000

**Major Building Components**

U.S. Courts: 182,300 Square Feet  
Tenant Offices: 105,700 Square Feet

**Parking**

Interior: 53 Spaces  
Outside: 96 Spaces

**Foundation**

Steel Pipe Friction Piles

**Structure**

Conventional Steel with Diagonal Bracing between Courtrooms.

**Mechanical**

Low Pressure, Variable Volume HVAC System  
Eight Passenger Elevators  
One Freight Elevator

**Exterior Walls**

“Indiana Limestone” brick, granite trim, pre-cast trim and coping; clear, low-e insulating glass in painted aluminum frames; glass entrance with bronze hardware.

**Public Area Interior Finishes**

**Public Floors and Stairs:** terrazzo.

**Main Lobby and Courtroom Galleries:** marble wainscot; marble courtroom entrances.

**Atrium:** marble stair wall; pre-cast concrete-clad columns; glass guardrails and bronze trim; painted aluminum ceiling panels.

**Courtrooms:** cherry wood paneling in the District, Magistrate and Bankruptcy courtrooms; bay oak paneling in the Court of Appeals; fabric-wrapped panels; wrapped acoustic panels in coffers.





## PROFILE: ROMAN L. HRUSKA

No other Nebraska lawmaker had an impact on our national judicial system like that of the Honorable Roman Lee Hruska (1904-1999), a United States Senator from 1954 to 1976. A longtime ranking Republican member and minority leader of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Senator Hruska introduced major Federal legal reforms and helped to shape the face of the modern judiciary by presiding or co-presiding over the confirmation of more than 500 Federal judges and, over his career, all nine members of the Supreme Court.

Senator Hruska was born in David City, Nebraska, to Czech immigrant parents, and had 10 siblings. He began his legal practice in Omaha after earning a law degree at Creighton University's College of Law in 1929. From 1944 to 1957, he served in several county, state, and university offices. In 1952, he was elected a U.S. Representative from Nebraska and held that seat until November 1954, when, upon the death of Nebraska's Senator Hugh Butler, he was elected senator.

His colleagues and admirers recall Senator Hruska's bipartisanship, particularly in judicial confirmation hearings with his

senior Democratic counterpart on the Judiciary Committee, Senator James O. Eastland. As a leading member of the committee, Senator Hruska served as the principal author of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 and the Organized Crime Control Act of 1972. He chaired the Commission on the Revision of the Federal Appellate Court System. The Senator was also known for his skillful management of legislation on the Senate floor. Senate Minority Leader Everett M. Dirksen referred to Senator Hruska as his "floor lawyer" on major bills.

At the 1997 groundbreaking for the courthouse that bears his name, Senator Hruska reminded the audience that "democracy and individual freedom are sometimes fragile things," but added, "Gratefully, they have become our birthright and will be further nurtured by this new complex."

## BIOGRAPHIES: THE ARCHITECT AND ARTIST

**James Ingo Freed, FAIA**, has forged a distinguished international career in architecture and large-scale urban design for nearly 50 years at the offices of Pei Cobb Freed & Partners in New York City. Among the more prominent projects he has designed are the United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum (1993) and the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center (1998) in Washington, D.C., the Jacob K. Javits Center in New York (1986 and 1988), the San Francisco Main Public Library (1996), and the Los Angeles Convention Center expansion (1993). Early in his career, Freed helped design 50 prototypical air-traffic control towers for the Federal Aviation Administration. Honoring the expanse and depth of his work, he has received several of the highest awards in architecture, including the R.S. Reynolds Memorial Award for Excellence in Architecture (1974), the Arnold W. Brunner Prize in Architecture (1987), the Medal of Honor of the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (1987), and the first annual Thomas Jefferson Award for Public Architecture from the American Institute of Architects

(1992). In 1995, President Bill Clinton presented him with the National Medal of Arts awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts, and in 1997, he received the award for Outstanding Achievement in Design for the Government of the United States.

**Stephen Robin** is a Philadelphia-based sculptor who has completed several public commissions and exhibited his work widely throughout the United States. He describes his work as “a point of balance, a reconciliation between sculpture and ornament.” His renderings of native plants and fruits recall forms of ornament that complement many Beaux-Arts and Art Deco buildings, and, indeed, attempt to “affect an allusion to architectural ornamentation so much in evidence of public buildings of the past.” He typically works in aluminum, bronze, and concrete to create striking graphical juxtapositions of solids and voids. Among his public installations are the *Federal Triangle Flowers* on the plaza of the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington, D.C. (1997), *Bowl of Fruit II* at the Pennsylvania Convention Center in Philadelphia (1989, adapted 1993), and *Cornucopiae* on the plaza of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Federal Building and United States Courthouse in Newark, New Jersey (1991). Robin received his Master’s degree in fine art from the Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1968.

## THE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION TEAM

### **Owner**

U.S. General Services Administration  
Regional Office: Kansas City, MO

### **Design Architects**

Pei Cobb Freed & Partners  
New York, NY

### **Design Excellence Peer**

Margaret McCurry  
Chicago, IL

### **Executive Architect/Structural, Mechanical, and Electrical Engineering/ Landscape Design/Life Safety**

DLR Group  
Omaha, NE

### **General Contractor**

Clark Construction Group, Inc.  
Bethesda, MD

### **Construction Quality Manager**

Bovis Land Lease  
Chicago, IL

### **Partnering**

Paula B. Wells  
Omaha, NE

### **Civil Engineering**

Hewitt Drapeaux Associates  
Omaha, NE

### **Cost Estimating**

Hanscomb Associates  
Chicago, IL

### **Courts Programming and Planning**

Gruzen Samton LLP  
New York, NY

### **Security**

Alta Consulting Services, Inc.  
Redmond, WA

### **Surveying**

Batheja & Associates, Inc.  
Omaha, NE

### **Vertical Transportation**

Lerch, Bates & Associates, Inc.  
Littleton, CO

### **Acoustical**

Coffen Fricke & Associates, Inc.  
Lenexa, KS

**Lighting**

Kugler Tillotson Associates  
New York, NY

**Geotechnical**

Woodward-Clyde Consultants  
Omaha, NE





**U.S. GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION  
AND THE DESIGN EXCELLENCE PROGRAM**

*Public buildings are part of a nation's legacy. They are symbolic of what Government is about, not just places where public business is conducted.*

The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) is responsible for providing work environments and all the products and services necessary to make these environments healthy and productive for Federal employees and cost-effective for the American taxpayers. As builder for the Federal civilian Government and steward of many of our nation's most valued architectural treasures that house Federal employees, GSA is committed to preserving and adding to America's architectural and artistic legacy.

GSA established the Design Excellence Program in 1994 to change the course of public architecture in the Federal Government. Under this program, administered by the Office of the Chief Architect, GSA has engaged many of the finest architects, designers, engineers, and artists working in America today to design the future landmarks of our nation. Through collaborative partnerships, GSA is implementing the goals of the

1962 *Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture*: (1) producing facilities that reflect the dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the Federal Government, emphasizing designs that embody the finest contemporary architectural thought; (2) avoiding an official style; and (3) incorporating the work of living American artists in public buildings. In this effort, each building is to be both an individual expression of design excellence and part of a larger body of work representing the best that America's designers and artists can leave to later generations.

To find the best, most creative talent, the Design Excellence Program has simplified the way GSA selects architects and engineers for construction and major renovation projects and opened up opportunities for emerging talent, small, small disadvantaged, and women-owned businesses. The Program recognizes and celebrates the creativity and diversity of the American people.

The Roman L. Hruska United States Courthouse in Omaha, Nebraska, was the first building designed and constructed under the GSA Design Excellence Program.

