

# UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE

Fresno, California



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**We wanted a courthouse that looks like  
it belongs in the valley and that is a beacon  
to downtown Fresno.**

Robert E. Coyle  
Senior Judge, United States District Court  
for the Eastern District of California

## REGIONAL HOMAGE

Since its frontier days in the mid-1800s, Fresno has been a vital crossroads in the San Joaquin Valley of California. Gold brought settlers to the region in the 1840s, but farming has kept them there ever since. Today, the city has more than 425,000 people, with nearly twice as many people in its metropolitan area. About one in three of the inhabitants work in agriculture. The valley is among the busiest cultivation centers in the world, abundant with lettuce, almonds, citrus fruits, and grapes, to name a few of its products. And its location, where the valley meets the Sierra Nevada Mountains, also makes Fresno a gateway for visitors to some of the nation's most spectacular natural scenery at Sequoia, Kings Canyon, and Yosemite national parks, all a short distance away.

Fresno's richly textured character finds its eloquent expression in the new United States Courthouse, located in the civic district of downtown. The building is at once rational and rugged, responding gracefully to its urban milieu while telling a story about the natural history of the region. Above all, it makes the powerful promise that our federal justice system

works at all levels to protect even the humblest members of our society.

The building's contextual overtures work at several scales simultaneously. Its 3.9-acre site constitutes an oblong block bounded by O Street, Tulare Street, P Street, and Capitol Street, part of a cluster of federal, state, and local government buildings that includes the old federal courthouse, which was completed in 1956. The block lies in Fresno's original downtown, where the street grid rotates 45 degrees from the prevailing city grid. Thus, from much of the city, views of the building are oblique, lending it a dynamic aspect from a distance.

Within its immediate block, however, the building follows a regular alignment. Long blocks with small-scale buildings define the civic district around the courthouse, which, by its program requirements must be a significantly larger structure, rising nine stories to 226 feet. With studied delicacy, the courthouse eases the impact of its large size by stepping up gently in profile from relatively low-scaled elevations around its base to the summit of its major L-shaped volume, which holds the courtrooms.

The courthouse as a whole sits well back from the edges of the site. The public focus is at the westernmost corner of the site, at O Street and Tulare Street, with the backbone of the building pulled to the site's easternmost corner. The western corner marks the entrance to a large public garden enclosed by a low wall clad in sandstone. The landscape of this garden, which covers nearly 1.5 acres, incorporates elements of the project's Art in Architecture commission. The arrangement of the plantings—a palette of native species dominated by large conifer trees—frames views of the building from the street and emphasizes the connection between the outdoors and the building's interior.

While the design gives highest priority to the security of the courthouse's occupants, it still engages in brisk dialogue with the street and the city. The emphasis at the main public levels is on transparency. Broad views from the outside to the interior serve as metaphor for the accountability our justice system must guarantee. From the inside, the sweeping views outward connect the courthouse to the world it serves.

Although the courthouse is the largest building of recent vintage in Fresno, the design gives human scale to its mass in several ways. Most notable is the building's system of distinctive precast concrete wall panels. Together, the panels form an irregular pattern of folds, extrusions, and corrugations across the building's buff-colored surface. On each elevation of the courthouse, the interlocking L-shaped wings are articulated into a recognizable base (marked by a darker color of precast panels), a middle, and a top. The low-rise entrance volumes—the slope-roofed vestibule and the adjoining bow-fronted public gallery—achieve a familiar scale that mediates between the street's flat expanse and the height of the wings.

Through a variety of details, no two façades are alike. The two principal wings are set back above the main public gallery volume. Across their elevations, convex curtain-wall bays mark the courtroom galleries. The ends of these elevations have smaller, cubic office bays that are rotated at a slight angle, giving a sense of movement to the relative stasis of the larger mass.

Across the main façades, sunshades run the length of the curtain-wall bays above the level of each story, adding texture to the outer surfaces while reducing solar glare on the interior. A glass wall joins the two main wings at the center, amplifying the depth of the building's façades.

On the P Street elevation, the façade breaks down into three bays of precast concrete joined by glass hyphens. Most of the windows on these bays have an off-center mullion pattern that draws the eye toward Tulare Street, an effect reinforced by the placement of sunshades at the outer corners of the two northwest bays.

The courthouse's superbly edited visual activity culminates at the roof levels. Atop each perpendicular wing is a distinctive sloped roof. The slope of the 9-story wing that parallels Capitol Street rises over that of the 7-story wing that parallels P Street, creating an intriguing collision of their silhouettes to symbolize the profiles of the Sierra Nevada Mountains vaulting dramatically across the eastern horizon. Besides these sloped roofs, the seven-story wing holds a lantern-like glass volume that

funnels light into the Special Proceedings courtroom below it. And wrapped around the higher sloped roof is a metal-clad porch canopy, supported by metal columns alternating with columns clad in precast concrete. The canopy covers a terrace that extends outward from a conference room on the ninth floor.

With its subtle logic of layers and textures, the new U.S. Courthouse in downtown Fresno translates the classic American courthouse typology into a new vocabulary—one that is modern but resolutely regional. The design of the building painstakingly binds itself to the city and the region it serves—not merely in physical terms but, as importantly, in spirit.

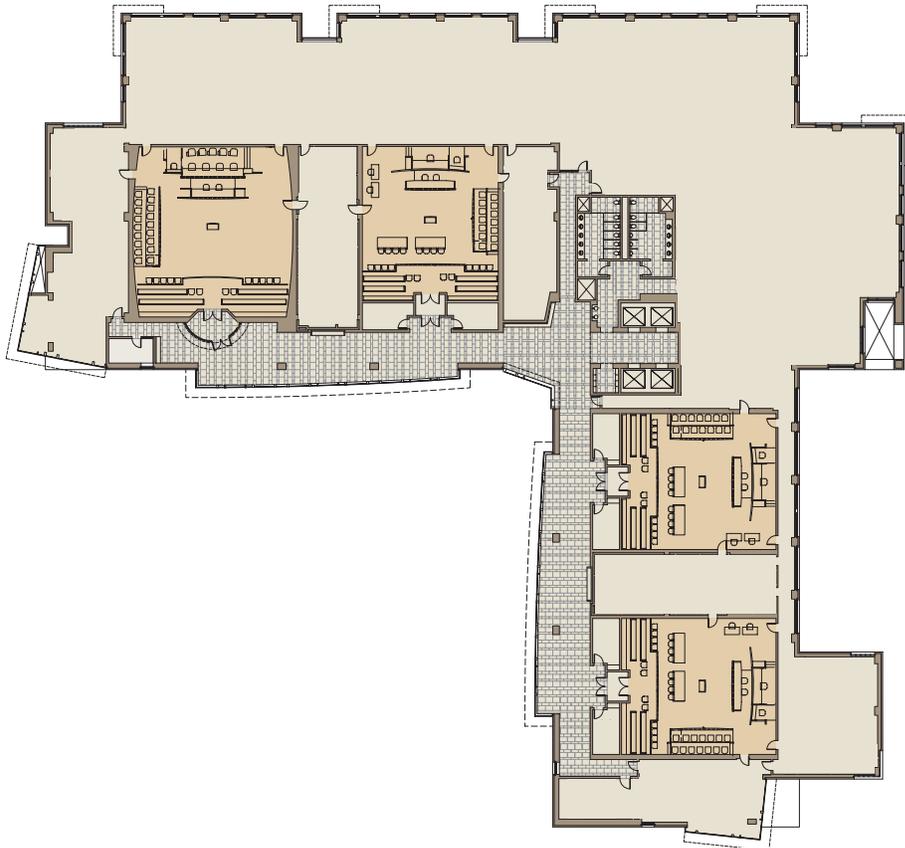




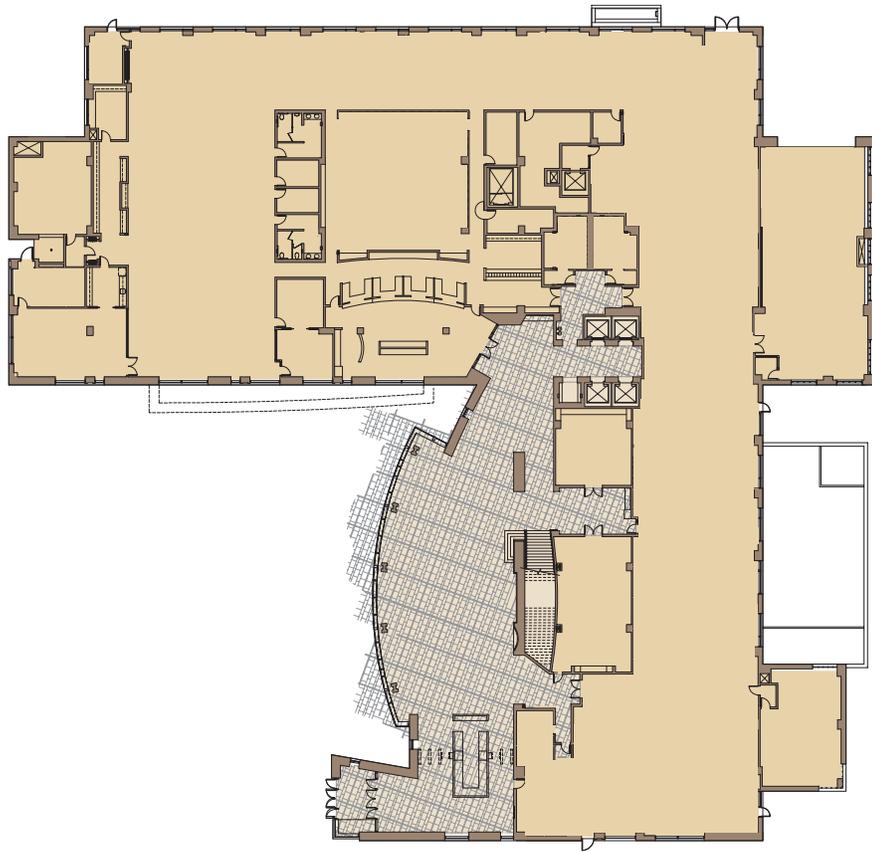


**We wanted to make it a space for people...  
to make it a magnificent public space.**

Robert E. Coyle  
Senior Judge, United States District Court  
for the Eastern District of California



**Typical Floor Plan**



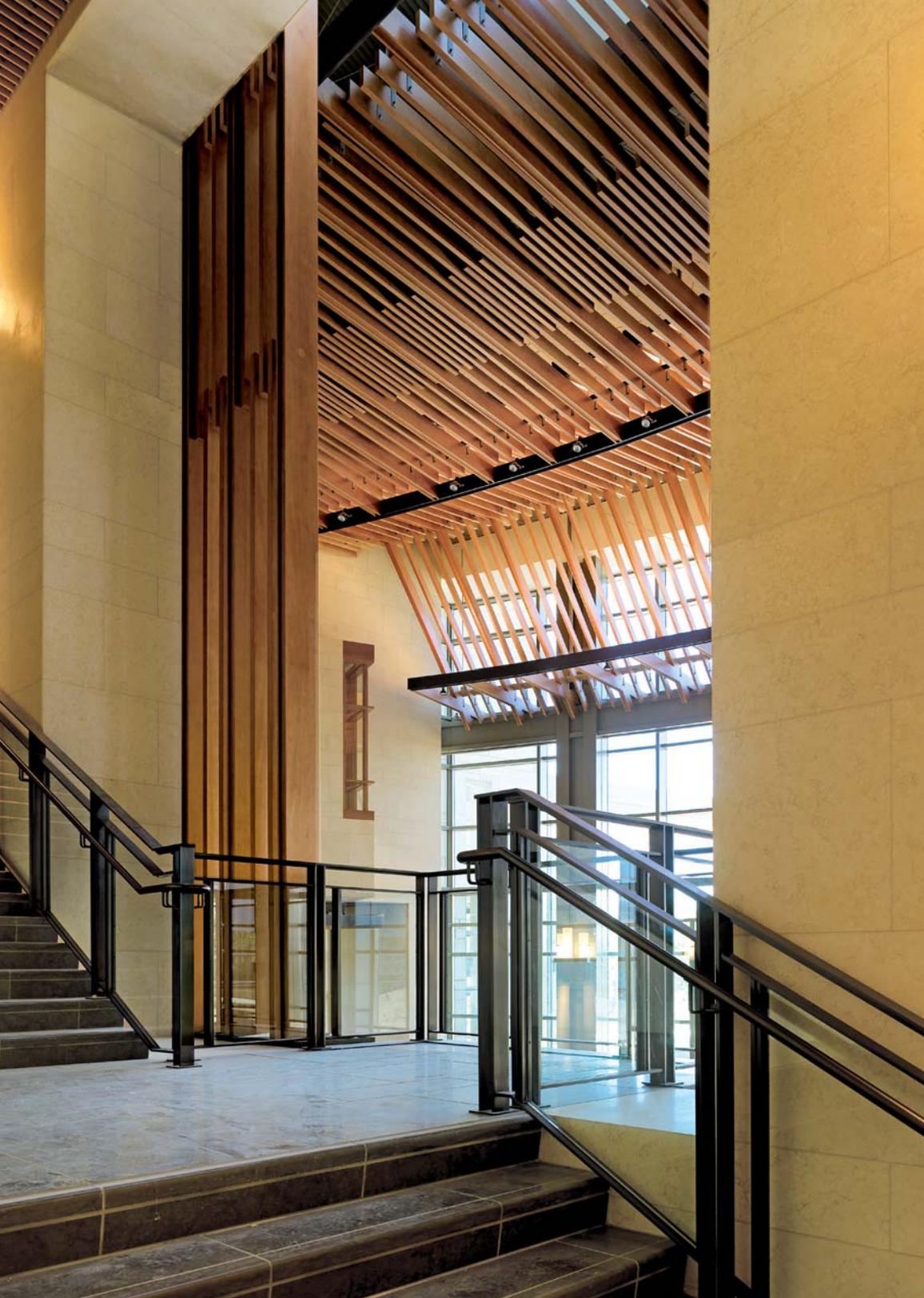
**First Floor Plan**



**P Street Elevation**



**O Street Elevation**



## REVERENCE AND INVENTION

Visual narratives describing dignity, balance, and the accountability of the judicial process make their first impressions around the courthouse entrance and are brought full-circle as visitors move through the building. A consistent visual language identifies the building as very much a product of its locality while maintaining its emphasis on the hallmarks of our justice system, which transcend time and place.

A predominately earthen palette defines the public spaces of the courthouse, unifying the design's details with its larger gestures. The entrance vestibule extends out from the building into the garden with solid walls and a roof sloping back toward the main building to echo the main building's iconic sky-level profile closer to the ground.

Warm light and natural materials suffuse the entry sequence, heightening a sense of discovery as the visitor proceeds inside. A monumental portico marks the entrance, with a roof supported by one large concrete column nearest the street and two bronze columns positioned on the garden's interior. Metal grids frame the entrance

vestibule's glass walls. Their bronze finish matches that of the curtain wall elements.

The main lobby is an expansive space of restrained embellishment; it becomes a virtual extension of the outdoor garden just beyond its bow-fronted glass wall. From the entrance vestibule, which tightens inward as the visitor progresses into the building, and throughout the expanse of the lobby, the floor is covered in a dark Lagos Azul stone with granite accents and runs slightly beyond the curtain wall to the exterior to reinforce the connection between indoors and outdoors. The floor is laid in a linear pattern rotated 45 degrees to follow the larger grid of Fresno beyond the old downtown—connecting the building and the site with their larger context. A variety of stone called Jerusalem stone lines the walls in a subtly variegated shade of ochre. The stone captures the ambient daylight and reflects it softly throughout the space.

Most striking among the design features of the lobby is its lattice ceiling wrought of Douglas fir members. It is suspended in three major planes: an apron-like section emerges from the inner wall, overlapping

below a gently upward-thrusting section that in turn gives way to a third, diagonally positioned assemblage that follows the curving glass wall. Hung by a steel armature, this wood lattice softly baffles the light entering through skylights to provide soft illumination for the stone walls. The lattice defines the geometry of the lobby space and becomes a sculptural element in its own right.

While the lobby is quite generous in its dimensions, its volume is made to appear greater by large wall openings that join it to adjacent spaces on both the ground and second floors. Beyond the lobby, the ground floor contains trustee hearing rooms for the Bankruptcy Court and the offices of the Clerk of the District Court. On the lobby's south edge, a broad ceremonial stair defined on one side by a concave wall leads to the second floor, which contains the main jury assembly room, the circuit library, and offices for the Clerk of the Bankruptcy Court. At the second floor's western edge, a small conference room overlooks the lobby.

A sense of relaxed formality fills the courtrooms and public galleries. Within

each wing of the building's L-shape, there are three floors (5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>) with two courtrooms located along a continuous gallery that has a curtain wall facing the public garden below. The eighth floor has two courtrooms.

The main public elevators occupy a core at the intersection of the two wings. Visitors entering a courtroom floor move either west or south along one of the courtroom galleries. Gallery interiors are muted to focus on the views toward the city. Wood and stone finishes and colored plaster link these spaces visually with the building's lobby. The courtroom entrances are delineated by wood alcoves with extended wood canopies resembling the lobby's slatted ceiling.

A reverence for tradition defines the courtroom interiors; yet these spaces use materials and detailing that make them unambiguously modern as well. In each, a central barrel vault floats above the center of the room, emphasizing the height of the space and helping to focus attention on the judge's bench. On either side, the floating vault structure holds custom light fixtures made of bronze and etched glass, which



cast their soft light upward. Beyond the vault on the room's edges, a folded ceiling marks the jury area and corresponds to the acoustical folding of the wall planes. The walls have planes of colored plaster alternating with acoustical fabric panels that reach upward beyond the vault. A 6-foot-high wainscot of curly figured maple wood wraps the entire space and is offset by a rich blue wool carpet. The wall behind the judge's bench, which is opposite the entrance, is paneled to its full height in wood with the official judicial seal of the Eastern District of California set directly behind the bench on center.

The Special Proceedings courtroom, which is often used for ceremonial purposes such as swearings-in of new judges or new citizens, is located on the west end of the 7th floor. It is marked by an entrance vestibule shaped like a half-drum and articulated with mullions and muntins surrounding a central door. The interior is organized around a central skylit dome. Etched glass and bronze light fixtures surround the dome, and the wall system complements the classical allusion with a fluted pattern of wood and polished plaster upon the walls.



## FOCUS: SCULPTURAL CONCRETE

One of the most intriguing aspects of the courthouse is its unique skin of sculptural precast concrete. Although precast concrete is commonly deployed as an exterior cladding material, it has seldom been manipulated to such dramatic effect as it has been in this courthouse.

The variation of concrete surface patterns across the elevations of the courthouse are intended to suggest the rugged nature of the landscape in the region, particularly the majestic faces of the Sierra Nevada Mountains rising to the east. Moreover, on such a large building, the faceted nature of the 1,261 individual concrete panels, most of them 6 inches thick, breaks down the massive wall surfaces into human proportions and heightens the sculptural effect of the entire building form. The concrete also makes a sharp contrast with the smooth glass of the curtain wall elements it frames. The artistic effect of the concrete mimics a mesmerizing display found in nature: throughout the day, as the sun travels across the sky, the walls of the building become an ever-changing tapestry of light and shadow.

The design of the concrete panel system is the result of extensive collaboration between the architect and the concrete fabricator. The pattern was designed to produce the greatest surface variation with the minimum number of forms. In doing so, it validates the use of concrete as a cost-effective alternative to stone, whose irregular qualities it imitates. Reducing the number of required panel types shortened the production time as well. Crucial technical requirements are also fulfilled: the panels meet the building's blast-resistance criteria, provide acoustical insulation, and ensure the durability of the building's envelope.

There are five types of panels in the precast system, differing according to their placement. The panels are placed at a rotation of 0 to 180 degrees, creating the illusion of a random pattern. In specifying the panels, the design and construction team devised the smallest joint size possible between panels. The joints match the width of the reveals within the panels, becoming an integral part of the design as a whole.

**The dynamic façade responds to the changing light and weather, and references some of the historic buildings in Fresno in the use of texture and detail.**

John Ruble  
Architect





## ART IN ARCHITECTURE

Art has always been an important feature of great architecture. The major civic artwork for the new United States Courthouse in Fresno is a landscape installation in the public garden.

### **Once Upon a Time in Fresno . . .**

In the public plaza in front of the courthouse Doug Hollis and Anna Valentina Murch

This artwork is a large-scale landscape installation covering nearly the entire 1.5 acres of the public garden between the street and the courthouse entrance. As experienced by a visitor entering at the corner of O Street and Tulare Street, *Once Upon a Time in Fresno . . .* is virtually a self-contained environment that celebrates the natural history of the San Joaquin Valley—the region that the courthouse was built to serve. While paying homage to the valley's complex ecology, the installation also blurs the boundaries between the inside and outside of the building.

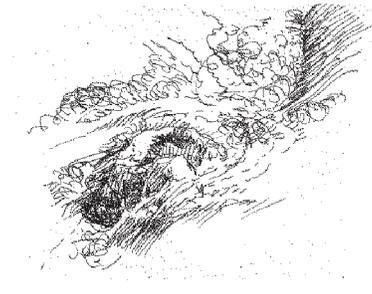
The artists have used plant life and earth forms to emphasize the region's special character. Along Tulare Street, an allée of incense cedar trees encloses the site and

leads to a grouping of pines at its pivotal corner at Tulare and O Streets. Low, stone walls dressed in sandstone define the formal edges of the site. A path of decomposed granite, carpeted with pine needles, leads through the landscape, which centers around a large mound of earth planted irregularly with pines. A sheltered refuge lies near the garden's inner corner, where oak trees symbolize California and the days when early farmers looked to oaks as signs of fertile land. The land slopes down gently to a deep pool studded with boulders of Academy Black granite quarried nearby. The pool represents the area's vernal lakes that receive the running snowmelt each spring.

At the inner boundary of this pool lies the edge of the lobby's smoother stone floor. The bowed glass curtain wall appears to dissolve between the exterior boulders and several others just inside the lobby that have been honed flat and polished to make seats. Brass inlays spaced continuously across the main floor of the lobby represent an orchard of orange trees. Positioned beneath the ceremonial stair is a granite well. Behind the well is a parabolic dish







built into the wall surface to focus the sound of the well's running water, making reference to the sources of irrigation water that changed the history of the valley.

#### **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 comprising 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 United States Courthouse in Fresno serves the Eastern District of California. It occupies most of what was formerly a two-block site, bounded by O Street, Tulare Street, P Street, and Capitol Street in the civic district of downtown. A public garden measuring 1.43 acres marks the entrance to the building at the corner of O Street and Tulare Street.

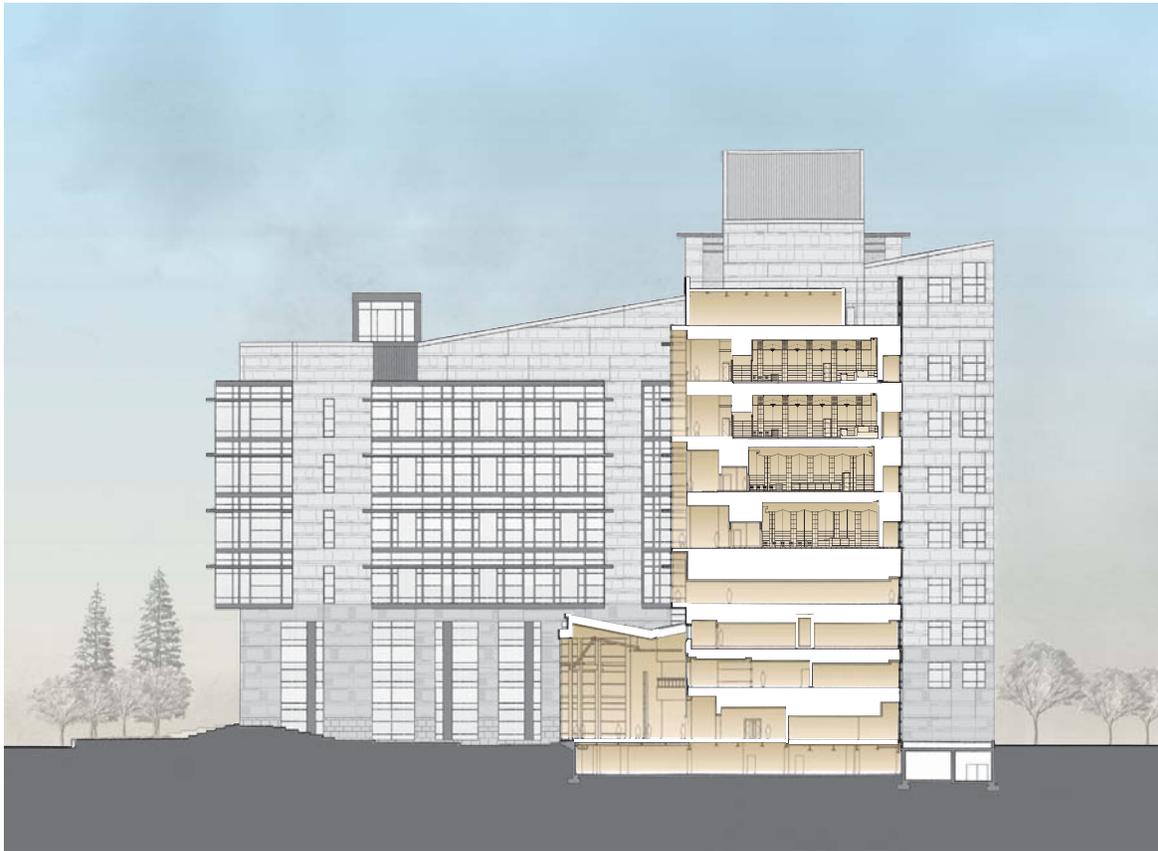
At 226 feet high, the building has nine stories above grade, each of which is 22 feet in height from floor to floor with an 8-inch access floor. There are 14 courtrooms in the building—six District (including the Special Proceedings courtroom), four Magistrate and four Bankruptcy courtrooms. There are 17 chambers for judges. A 20-year expansion program calls for up to six additional courtrooms and six additional chambers. The site's design anticipates further expansion capability at the west side of the block.

Courtrooms lie on floors 5 through 8; floors 5 to 7 have four courtrooms each and the eighth floor has two courtrooms. The Special Proceedings courtroom is on

the seventh floor. The first floor contains hearing rooms for bankruptcy trustees and media facilities. The second floor houses the offices of the Clerk of the Bankruptcy Court, a cafeteria, and general jury assembly. The third floor and fourth floor hold federal tenant spaces. Bankruptcy courtrooms occupy the fifth floor. Magistrate courtrooms reside on the sixth floor. Floors seven and eight hold District courtrooms.

There are eight elevators in the courthouse: four for the public, two for freight, and two for the U.S. Marshals Service. The building's functional spaces have been stacked and arranged to provide three distinct circulation systems on the interior, allowing the public, courthouse employees, and incarcerated defendants or witnesses to move about separately.

Communications technology in the courthouse represents the state of the art, allowing video uplink to view evidence, hear testimony, or undergo arraignment. A highly flexible network of information systems may be easily adapted via underfloor networks on each level.



**Section through lobby and typical courtroom floors**

**Location**

A 3.9-acre site in downtown Fresno, bounded by O Street, Tulare Street, P Street, and Capitol Street.

**Size**

428,000 Gross Square Feet  
226 Feet High  
9 Floors Above Grade

**Time Frame**

Design Awarded: December 1997  
Design Approved: October 1999  
Construction Started: April 2002  
Dedication: October 2005

**Major Building Components**

U.S. Courts: 201,701 Usable Sq Ft  
Tenant Office Space: 85,602 Usable Sq Ft  
Total Rentable Area: 400,681 Square Feet

**Parking**

110 spaces

**Structure**

Concrete slabs with composite metal decks; composite steel beams and girders; special moment-resisting frame.

**Foundation**

Concrete footings

**Mechanical**

Central plant with multiple water-cooled centrifugal chillers; closed loop cooling towers for air conditioning; distributed air handling units (two per floor); underfloor air on lower (tenant) floors; overhead distribution on upper (court) floors; hot water reheating through perimeter VAV boxes; high-efficiency boilers.

**Finishes**

Exterior: Custom-patterned precast with color; custom curtain wall and sun shades; standing seam zinc roof; stacked sandstone site walls; stone and custom-colored concrete paving.

Main Entry Lobby: Limestone walls; colored plaster walls; maple wood paneling; Douglas fir wood ceiling; Lagos Azul stone floorings; oil-rubbed bronze railings.

Courtrooms and Chambers: Curly figured maple wall paneling; plaster and acoustical ceiling panels; custom lighting; oil-rubbed bronze railings.



## BIOGRAPHIES: THE ARCHITECT AND THE ARTISTS

**John Ruble**, FAIA, is a principal of Moore Ruble Yudell Architects in Santa Monica, California. He earned architecture degrees at the University of Virginia and the University of California, Los Angeles. He began his career as an architect and planner in the Peace Corps in Tunisia and designed a series of award-winning public schools and civic projects with the architect Jules Gregory. Ruble began his partnership with Charles Moore (1925-1993) and Buzz Yudell in California in 1977. His work has spanned many years of projects in Germany and Sweden, such as Berlin's Tegel Harbor and the United States Embassy in Berlin, and Potatiså kern and Tango housing in Malmö, Sweden. He has also helped to establish the firm's long-running relationships with academic institutions, among them the University of California, Santa Cruz and the University of Washington in Tacoma. He has taught, researched and led graduate design studios at UCLA and Cornell University.

**Douglas Hollis** was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and now lives in San Francisco. As a teenager, he spent time living with Native American families in Oklahoma,

and has stated that his experiences there persist as influences on his life and work. Hollis's earliest projects afforded the opportunities to work with musicians, dancers, filmmakers, engineers, and physicists. His sculpture and landscape installations often rely on the mercurial qualities of light, wind, and water. Hollis has completed many site-specific commissions, which include Aeolian Harp (1976) for the San Francisco Exploratorium; A Sound Garden (1983) for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; Singing Beachchairs (1987) in Santa Monica, California; and Watersongs (1996), a GSA Art in Architecture commission at the Vincent E. McKelvey Federal Building in Menlo Park, California. Hollis has also collaborated with wife and fellow artist Anna Valentina Murch on several projects. For all of his public projects, Hollis states that he wishes to create "places that have an oasis-like quality, where people can pause to catch their spiritual breath in the midst of their everyday lives."

**Anna Valentina Murch**, is an artist whose work focuses on creating places that lead

the viewer on a sensory and psychological journey that measures time and provokes memory. She received a Master of Arts degree in Environmental Media, Sculpture from the Royal College of Art in London and a Graduate Diploma from the Architectural Association in London. Since 1980, her work has been involved with designing and building large public art projects that use light, water, sound, and plant material to create sequences of spaces that change with the seasons and heighten awareness of the natural cycles of time. Murch has worked as an artist on many collaborative design teams, including the St. Louis Metro System, North Courtyard at the University of California Davis, Oakland's Rockridge Public Library, and the Muni Metro Extension shelters and wind screens along South Embarcadero and King Street, San Francisco. Recent commissions include Arroyo Suite, a 40' x 200' passageway incorporating sequential sculptural interventions in Constellation Place Century City, Los Angeles; Cycles, a courtyard installation for the Queens Civic Court, New York City; and Skytones, a time based volume lighting work located in five 25' x 20' niches along the upper

level of the Third Avenue arcade and recital hall lobby for Benaroya Hall, the Seattle Symphony. Murch has taught at the University of California at Berkeley, the San Francisco Art Institute, Harvard University, and is currently a Professor of Art at Mills College in Oakland, California.

## THE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION TEAM

### Owner

U.S. General Services Administration  
Regional Office: San Francisco, CA

### Design Architect

Moore Ruble Yudell  
Santa Monica, CA

### Architect of Record

Gruen Associates  
Los Angeles, CA

### Artists

Doug Hollis and  
Anna Valentina Murch  
San Francisco, CA

### GSA Project Team

Maria Ciprazo (project executive)  
James Reed (project manager)  
Dale Shue (construction engineer)  
Arthur Brown (contracting officer)  
Inger Whitfield (reality specialist)

### Design Excellence National Peers

Barton Phelps  
Barton Phelps & Associates  
Los Angeles, CA

Chester A. Widom  
Widom Wein Cohen  
Santa Monica, CA

Louis Naidorf  
Fresno, CA

### Art Peer

Tamara Thomas  
Fine Arts Services, Inc.  
Los Angeles, CA

### Construction Excellence National Peers

Erik Bodholt  
EB Construction Consulting Services  
Veradale, WA

Albert A. Peter, Jr.  
Peter Associates  
Washington, DC

Robert Wilson  
Gilbane Building Company  
Laurel, MD

### Construction Management

Abide International  
San Francisco, CA

### General Contractor

Dick Corporation/Matt Construction  
Joint Venture  
Pittsburgh, PA/Santa Fe Springs, CA

### Civil Engineering

Gianetta Engineering  
Fresno, CA

### Structural Engineering

John A. Martin & Associates  
Los Angeles, CA

### Mechanical/Plumbing

TKSC  
Irvine, CA

### Precast Concrete

Clark Pacific  
West Sacramento, CA

### Electrical

FBA Engineering  
Irvine, CA

**Geotechnical**

BSK  
Fresno, CA

**Vertical Transportation Consultant**

Lerch Bates & Associates  
San Juan Capistrano, CA

**Landscape Architecture**

Pamela Burton & Company  
Santa Monica, CA

**Exterior Wall Consultant**

Curtain Wall Design & Consulting  
Dallas, TX

**Lighting Designer**

Francis Krahe & Associates  
Los Angeles, CA

**Security Consultant**

Sako & Associates  
Chicago, IL

**Graphic Design**

Follis Design  
Pasadena, CA

**Life Safety/Code Compliance**

Rolf Jensen & Associates  
Yorba Linda, CA

**Acoustical**

Schaffer Acoustics  
Pacific Palisades, CA

**Audio-Visual**

Menlo Scientific Acoustics  
Topanga, CA

**Blast Consultant**

Hinman Consulting  
San Francisco, CA

**Cost Estimator**

Hanscomb  
Newport Beach, CA

**Specifications**

Construction Specifications  
Woodland Hills, CA

**Green Specifications**

KMI Associates  
Glendale, CA



**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 and 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, disadvantaged, and women-owned businesses. The program recognizes and celebrates the creativity and diversity of the American people.

The Design Excellence Program is the recipient of a 2003 National Design Award from the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, and the 2004 Keystone Award from the American Architectural Foundation.

