VISION + VOICE

Volume 4 | Voices of Sustainable Building

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Introduction

Combing through the inventory of the U.S. General Services Administration's Public Buildings Service is to witness the trajectory of sustainable design and construction in the United States. A full quarter of the agency's portfolio qualifies as landmarks, and many of the gracious old structures embody passive design principles like natural orientation, thermal mass, and daylighting. These fundamental strategies are being taught in architecture schools today.

GSA's midcentury buildings relied more heavily on mechanical systems for controlling interior climate, yet they also represent Great Society principles of civic engagement that were meant to ensure communities' long-term stewardship. Moreover, when active green technologies first hit the market in the 1970s, PBS was testing them—installing evacuated solar tubes on the rooftop of the Federal Building in Saginaw, Michigan, for example. In Manchester, New Hampshire, meanwhile, the Norris Cotton Federal Building integrated similar solar panels as well as cutting-edge ventilation and lighting, which promised tremendous energy conservation for all buildings.

Although thinking about sustainability has waxed, waned, and evolved over the years, consistently GSA has been at the forefront of design innovation and construction. In the 21st century the agency is again playing a standard-bearer role, as it employs sustainability to lower costs for its tenant agencies and achieve greater value for taxpayers. That fact can be credited to the founding of the Design Excellence Program in 1994.

Green and *sustainable* were not part of the lexicon when the Design Excellence Program launched, in tandem with an unprecedented initiative by the Judiciary to construct and update federal courthouses. Rather, the architects who won GSA commissions, and the private-sector peer reviewers who helped select and mentor those architects, had only one word in mind: *quality*. Quality manifests in a public building's symbolic meaning, its resonance as a community gathering place, its ability to stimulate economic development in its region, its functionality as a workplace for government employees, and its efficiency as a consumer of natural resources. When you define the word socially, culturally, and environmentally, *quality* sounds a lot like *sustainability*. The Design Excellence Program has never wavered from its commitment to making great places for the American people. What has changed is the vocabulary that describes that mission.

Since the formation of this program, the purview of Design Excellence has expanded to include land ports of entry, federal offices, and many other facilities. One could also argue that the Design Excellence Program paved the way for many laudable sustainability efforts that GSA oversees currently. They include the Smart Buildings and Green Proving Ground initiatives, and the rich and varied work of the Office of Federal High-Performance Green Buildings. While such important undertakings test, study, and disseminate new technologies or greener building operations, the Design Excellence Program guarantees that these innovations are part of a holistic vision of quality.

It is only fitting, then, that sustainability is the subject of this new volume of the *Vision+Voice* series. These interviews dive more deeply into GSA's history of reducing the federal footprint, they visualize the current state of the art, and they show where a greener GSA may be heading. *Vision+Voice4* captures the breadth of sustainability in public buildings, from their enduring social impact to their renewable energy production. In doing so, *Vision+Voice4* celebrates the remarkable work that GSA does, and it will inspire all readers to set the bar ever higher.