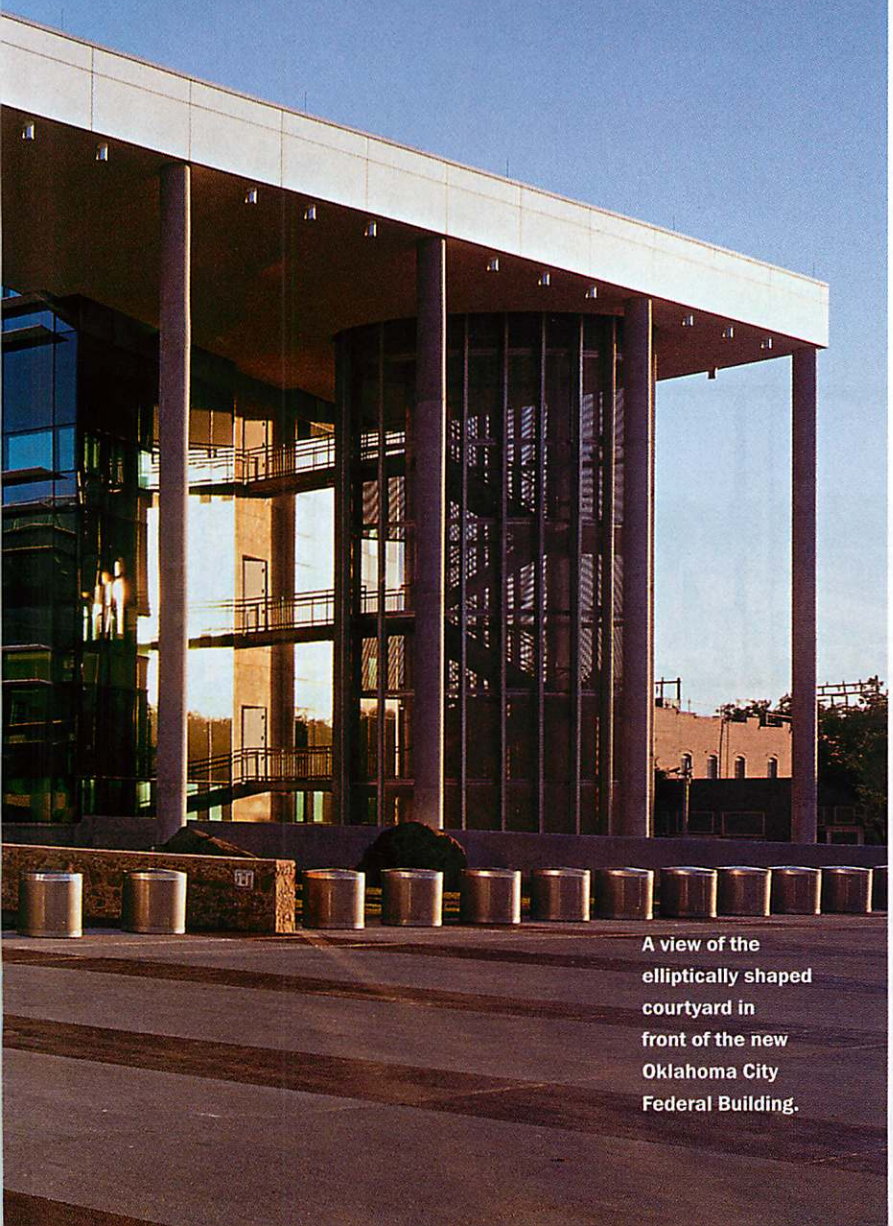
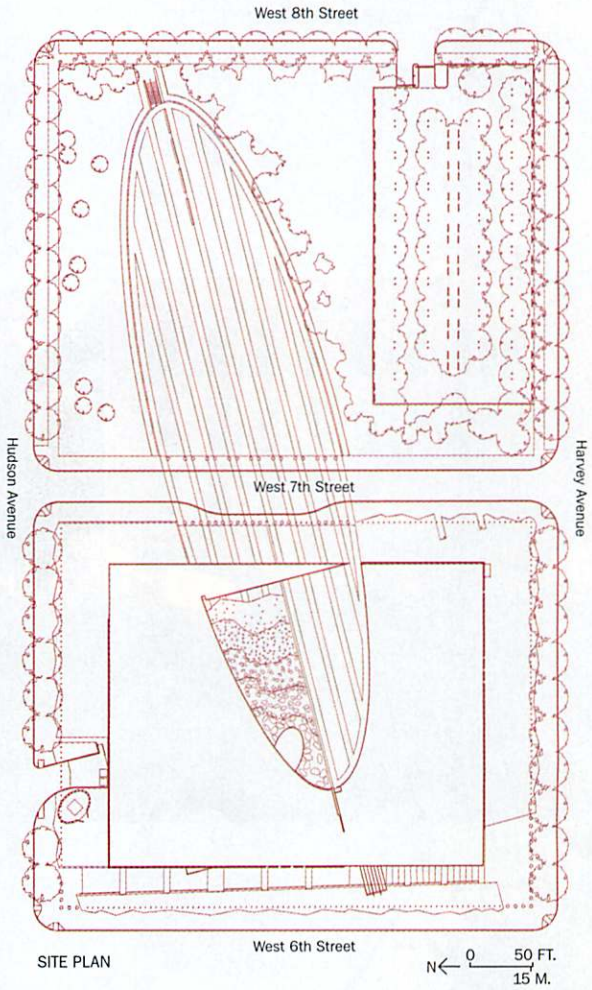
Oklahoma City's new Federal Building combines security and openness in a superior way



A view of the elliptically shaped courtyard in front of the new Oklahoma City Federal Building.



SITE PLAN

By Jane C. Loeffler

The Oklahoma City Federal Building makes a strong and welcome statement of federal purpose in a place that will always figure in our collective memory. It replaces the nine-story Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building that collapsed in a terrorist bombing on April 19, 1995. Aimed at the federal government, that attack killed 168 people and was the worst such incident on U.S. soil when it occurred. We are just beginning to see the impact of that blast and that of the more recent 9/11 attacks on the civic landscape. In that context, the federal building is significant as a major public project that manages to combine necessary security with design excellence.

Given the fear that gripped federal workers in the aftermath of the bombing, and the realization that the unhardened design of the previous building had left occupants at risk, security imperatives easily could have overwhelmed the design of any replacement building. They did not because the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), which oversees all federal-government construction projects, had determined that the new building would not be a memorial but a fully functioning state-of-the-art building. (A poignant memorial, designed by Hans and Torrey Butzer and Sven Berg [ARCHITECTURAL RECORD,

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The building occupies the southern end of the site (this page, above), nearest downtown. Artist Brad Goldberg's boulder-strewn water sculpture takes up one half of the courtyard (opposite, bottom). A public park is located on the block to the north of the building (opposite, top).

July 2000, page 28], was dedicated on April 19, 2000, on the site where the Murrah Building fell.) When the GSA awarded the high-profile commission to Ross Barney + Jankowski Architects of Chicago through its Design Excellence Program, the intent was to make the building forward-looking, but not fortresslike.

When the GSA's chief architect Ed Feiner describes the new building as "a commitment building," he's referring to the fact that the GSA could have permanently moved workers to another area, or leased space somewhere, rather than replacing Murrah with a new government-owned building here. In the aftermath of the bombing, Ron Norick, who was then Oklahoma City's mayor, headed to Washington to meet with President Clinton at the White House. There, he stressed that "it was vital to keep the federal presence in the downtown area."

A replacement for the Murrah Building was deemed essential as a way of jump-starting redevelopment in the area of the blast, and a means to keep scores of federal jobs in the city, argued Norick. "I knew if they didn't build the building, they'd be moving many or most of the jobs to Dallas or Kansas City or someplace else," he declared. Norick's mayoral successor Kirk Humphreys reiterated this, adding, "The federal government had no clear identity without a building." In a remarkable display of bipartisan unity, led by staunch Republicans, who ironically represent a constituency that harbors strong antigovernment sentiments, Oklahoma's elected officials backed a new federal building as a much-needed symbol.

Any new workplace really had to lure back reluctant workers after the bombing. According to Norick, tenants who survived the attack "just wanted to get out of town." HUD workers, for example, who relocated to an old shopping center, liked it there and wanted to stay in the convenient, inconspicuous structure, which had free parking. To win back the confidence of former tenants, GSA decided to exclude law-enforcement agencies from the new building. Coupled with the evident security engineered into the structure, these decisions convinced most (if not all) tenants to return to the city-center site.

According to Leonard C. Murphy, who supervised the $40 million project for GSA, "We knew we didn't want to build a bunker, and also that we wanted a building that invited the public." For architect Carol Ross Barney, FAIA, this challenge meant finding a design solution that would look, feel, and be secure, but one that would also welcome visitors and encourage engagement with the larger community. Because former Murrah tenants did not want anything tall, she started out thinking in terms of a campuslike arrangement of low structures. Unfortunately, as one block of the planned-upon three-block parcel was unavailable, she decided on a single, three-story structure paired with a public park on two blocks. Instead of pushing the building to the far end of the site, where it would have seemed more imposing and remote, she pulled it as close as possible to the south end, near downtown. That means it is clearly visible from the memorial, but it does not upstage it in any way.

It also means that the memorial, a shallow reflecting pool and a field of 168 empty chairs, is visible from the building—a potentially uncomfortable reminder to federal

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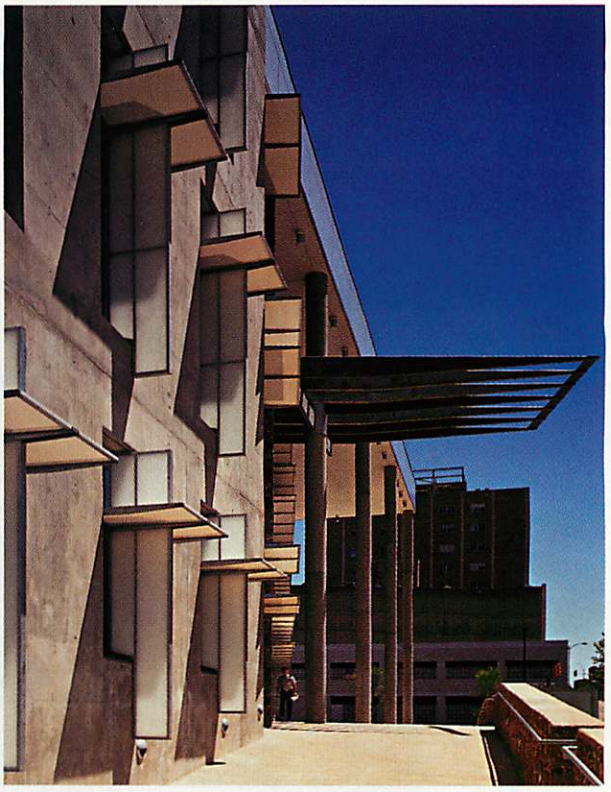
workers. That prompted the installation of floor-to-ceiling window coverings in all of the offices. But workers say this concern turned out to be unfounded, as no one at the new building is closing the blinds to block the view of the memorial. Even in the offices and conference rooms occupied by HUD, the agency most affected by the Murrah attack, workers prefer to keep the shades open—evidence, they say, of their comfort level in the new building.

To augment openness, Ross Barney gave the 181,000-square-foot, U-shaped building two equally accessible "fronts," each with its own personality. Facing south to the downtown (and also the memorial), the building takes a formal stance. A soaring colonnade and concrete walls punched with windows line up with city streets—homage to the grid on which Oklahoma City was laid out in the land rush of 1889. Facing north, however, to a less densely settled and newer part of town that promises to see rapid development over the next decade, a visual drama unfolds. Here the building opens up completely to reveal a stunning courtyard featuring a glass curtain wall that partially encircles an installation of cascading red granite boulders. The rocks, gathered from a bison farm in the hills of western Oklahoma, were selected and arranged by landscape sculptor Brad Goldberg as part of GSA's Art in Architecture Program. Coming upon the courtyard is like is opening a jewel box and finding an unexpected gem.

Light shelves and sunshades protect windows on the south elevation (right). Lobby walls are covered with a veneer of local creek stone (below).



SITE FEATURES HERE EXPRESS ROSS BARNEY'S BELIEF THAT "BUILDINGS ARE ROOTED IN THEIR PLACE."

Beyond the courtyard is a park planted with trees on one side to evoke the Oklahoma woodlands and with native grasses and wildflowers on the other to evoke the prairie. A surface lot that keeps unscreened parked cars at least 100 feet from the building—a security requirement—lies beyond the park, in the northeast corner of the site. Ross Barney inscribed an elongated ellipse in the landscape, a dramatic device that ties together the two-block site. She extended its geometry into the building, integrating the park seamlessly with the architecture. From the air, the ellipse, with its alternating stripes of crushed red stone and green grass, makes the new landmark easy to spot. Others can debate whether or not that is a good idea, but for a visitor approaching on foot, the stripes simply lead the eye to the most striking portion of the building.

Describing her fascination with everything from the texture of local rocks (incorporated into a remarkable wall veneer that resembles an archaeological excavation) to the elliptical shape of ceremonial grounds used by Native American Indians (the inspiration for the ellipse), Ross Barney emphasizes her belief that "buildings are rooted in their place." Stuart O. Dawson of Sasaki Associates; artist Douglas Hollis's 46 star-shaped, stainless-steel benches symbolizing Oklahoma's entry into the Union as its 46th state; and artist Goldberg's sculpture, whose boulders seem to have arrived self-propelled from the Washita Mountains, aid her ably in connecting the architecture to its locale.

What also ties the site together are the steel bollards, some illuminated at night, that ring the perimeter and separate the building from vehicular traffic. Compared to the massive Jersey barriers that surround public buildings elsewhere, these are not intrusive, and most are likely to be at least partially obscured by the native grasses that have yet to establish themselves on the site. (The landscape architect, though, says the intent was never to hide them.) Video cameras mounted on poles near the perimeter provide the building's first line of defense.

Blast-resistant design by Weidlinger Associates and a structural system engineered by The Benham Companies of Oklahoma City provide a second line of defense. Given GSA's stringent force-protection requirements, Jim Reynolds, who served as project architect for Benham, is understandably proud of "the concrete two-way slabs that permit the high ceilings and open, unobstructed interiors"; the "wall columns" that permit the large windows; and the stone veneer, devised in collaboration with Ross Barney so that individual stones will not become projectiles in the event of an explosion. To minimize further risk of injury in the event of a blast, the architects selected panels of insulated laminated glass bonded to steel frames with structural silicone. The window units are manufactured by the same company that fabricated replacement windows for the Pentagon.

Undoubtedly, one of the most welcoming features of the building is the entry arrangement that allows people to walk into the small lobby atrium from either the north or south "front" entrance without having to pass through security. By having both entrances feed into one lobby, Ross Barney allowed the same guards to monitor both doors. And she created an inviting lobby open to the public, where colored light pours through a skylight of dichroic glass, then through glass bridges connecting the floors above. Security screening occurs in adjacent areas where the walls are made of polished steel for strength, and to set them apart as transition zones between the lobby and offices beyond.

PEOPLE CAN ENTER THE BUILDING'S LOBBY WITHOUT HAVING FIRST TO PASS THROUGH SECURITY GATES.

A daylighting system will make interior electric lights unnecessary much of the time. Features include sunshades or shelves (made of fabric and framed in aluminum) that allow the building to screen out sun and glare and "harvest daylight," as Ross Barney puts it. Heat and air-conditioned air are distributed using an underfloor distribution system that enables planning flexibility.

Unlike John Johansen's Mummers Theater (1970), an Oklahoma City landmark that always pleased architectural cognoscenti elsewhere but never won local acclaim, the new federal building is already recognized as an asset. Downtown OKC Inc. lists it along with the other urban redevelopment projects, including the popular Bricktown, that have totally transformed the southwest capital since the early 1990s—a sign that a grateful city has already embraced it as part of its future. ■

Visitors can actually enter the building's small lobby from either end before going through a single security area (top). Laminated-glass footbridges (right) allow people on upper floors to pass from one side of the building to the other.