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Denver's New Urban Jail

by Lee Becker, FAIA, and Steve White, AIA, LEED AP
Hartman-Cox Architects

In 2005, the citizens of Denver voted to build a new judicial center that will expand Denver's Civic Center campus two full city blocks to the west. The complex includes a new 30-plus courtroom Courthouse, a parking garage and a new pre-trial and pre-sentence detention center/jail, the largest component of the three. It is easy to understand voting to build a new Courthouse with a parking structure, but why build such a large jail in the Civic Center, the symbolic public core of downtown Denver. Inherently jails are not urban place makers, nor are they celebrated destinations as museums, libraries, cultural buildings, or even courthouses. Their operational demands and security constraints outweigh aesthetic considerations. However, jails provide an essential role in the judicial process and a tremendous practical and symbolic benefit comes from locating them in town, immediately adjacent to the judicial buildings they serve.

Like many other cities, Denver's Civic Center forms the city's spatial and architectural center of gravity. An offspring of Daniel Burnham's "City Beautiful" movement, the buildings and spaces are magnificent. The gold leaf-domed capitol proudly frames the east side of the Civic Center park, which cascades down to the Beaux Arts "City and County" building, the neoclassical Carnegie library and Italianate Federal Mint. The Denver Public Library and art museums enhance this collection of venerable buildings. The new courthouse and jail will expand this campus two full city blocks to the west, and form a new judicial plaza to link the emerging mixed-use neighborhoods to the south with the central business district to the north.



The Denver Justice Center plaza with the new Detention Center on the left.
Rendering by Vladislav Yeliseyev

The jail's exterior design is mindful of its seriousness of purpose without being foreboding. The massing will preserve views from the capitol steps to the Rockies. Facades reinforce the street walls established by the existing Civic Center buildings along the main avenues to strengthen the continuity of the surrounding streetscape plan. The abstracted classical organization of base middle and top will relate to the original Civic Center buildings while transitioning to the more contemporary new courthouse. The exterior material will be textured, "shot sawn," Indiana limestone, in concert with its neighbors. The outdoor recreation yards are inner courts, facing away from the street, enhancing privacy between the detainees and the public. These courts bring daylight to the interior while generating a solid modern exterior appearance. The main entry facade steps down to an open colonnade establishing a pedestrian scale along the public space. The resulting form is a simple backdrop to the judicial plaza in deference to the new courthouse, designed by Denver based, Klipp architects.

Ricci Green Associates, Voorhis Robertson Justice Services, Oz Architecture, and Hartman-Cox Architects were committed to designing a safe, secure, "normative" environment, i.e. one that maintains the humanity and dignity of detainees, and one that enables a quick and speedy trial process. A constant refrain through the planning process was "operations drives design." This is true as operational requirements are rigorous and safety, security, and clarity of circulation are all paramount. Housing types will be near respective support functions to shorten

travel distances within the building. The result is a simple concise plan for a five story, 440,000 square foot, 1,500-bed building.



The detention center will have a range of housing types, from open dormitories to high security units, to meet the specific needs of detainees. Ricci Green Associates, Voorhis Robertson Justice Services and the Denver Sheriff's Department developed a detainee classification process to match detainees to the most appropriate housing type. Supervision is direct, as the sheriff's staff is in the dayrooms rather than in separated officer stations. The detention window design will maximize daylight in the dayrooms and provide a visual connection to the outdoor recreation areas. There is a range of options for family visitation. All of these features are critical for a normative environment.

The close proximity to the courthouse will shorten the wait to trial by streamlining detainee transport. Currently, detainees who arrive by bus from the suburbs are openly ushered across the street from the front of the Federal Mint to the City and County Building. Detainees will now be booked, processed and released or classified within the building. Transfer from housing to the courthouse will be via a secure tunnel. Transfers to and from the detention center will occur in an enclosed vehicle sally port, out of public view. The downtown location provides immediate access to public transportation for those released. An arraignment courtroom and a pretrial hearing room are located in the detention center immediately adjacent to detention housing to minimize circulation.

The downtown location expresses Denver's confidence in the judicial system and its empathy for all of its citizens. Rather than building the jail "out of sight and out of mind," locating the detention center in the Civic Center shows a commitment to transparency in the system and to every citizen's right to a swift judicial process. Denver's correctional system engages detainees in vocational, cognitive and religious educational programs to improve welfare of detainees so that, at some point, they can successfully rejoin the community and not come back. Our goal for the building is to foster that mission and create a positive addition to the Civic Center.

For more than three decades Lee Becker, FAIA, partner with Hartman-Cox Architects, has managed and designed buildings that span the range from abstract modern to "Collegiate Gothic" and "Classical".

An associate with Hartman-Cox Architects, Steve White, AIA LEED AP has spent his career designing buildings in historically sensitive urban cores, particularly in Washington, D.C.