

GSA CASE STUDY

BYRON G. ROGERS FEDERAL OFFICE BUILDING AND COURTHOUSE



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INTRODUCTION

Recently, a GSA First Impressions Initiative improvements project at the Byron G. Rogers Federal Office Building and Courthouse -- a 1960s-era complex in Denver, Colorado -- was stopped short after it was well underway by an issue related to its potential historic significance. The gist of the dilemma was that the project was at the design concepts phase when the potential historic significance of the complex was recognized by *Denver: The Modern City*, a new publication citing its importance to Denver's modern architectural tradition. At issue was whether the complex of buildings, despite its relatively recent date of construction, rose to a certain level of historic significance, and, if so, what the appropriate GSA response was.

Principal to the successful resolution of the issues were: 1) academically correct historical evaluations of the property's eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places; 2) careful consultation and consensus-building among principal stakeholders from the GSA, the State Historic Preservation Office, and others; and 3) GSA's stewardship of its historic building stock and ability to incorporate good preservation planning into an ongoing and important project.

THE GSA'S FIRST IMPRESSIONS INITIATIVE

The mission of the GSA's nationwide First Impressions Initiative is to enhance the public's perception of the GSA and the Federal government by improving the appearance and efficiency of GSA buildings. The Initiative focuses on public spaces in buildings, including more identifiable entries, improved security flow, improved signage, and removal of clutter from public spaces. Four pilot projects kicked off the Initiative -- Byron Rogers was one of these four projects.

GSA's goals for the First Impressions improvements at Byron Rogers were to draw attention to the only secured entry point to the office tower (hidden at the juncture of the tower and courthouse), to provide adequate queuing space for lobby security screening, to upgrade perimeter security screening, and to encourage use of the plaza spaces. Project plans called for a principal new glass entry structure incorporating new security and screening devices, the removal of the canopy linking the buildings at the ground level, and the removal of certain key components such as a bronze art column.

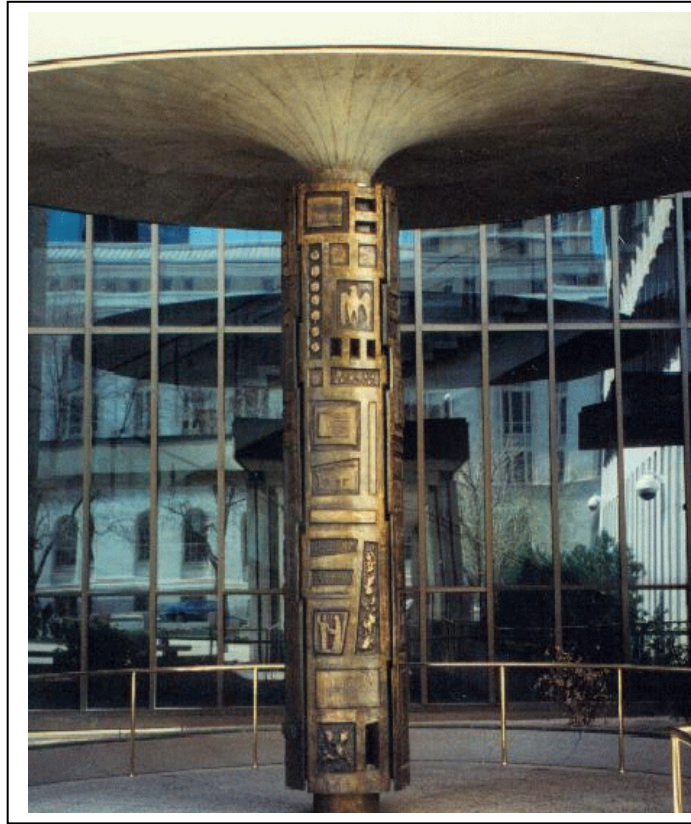
Other more practical considerations in the Byron Rogers improvements were – in today's more customer-focused and business-oriented climate -- GSA's need to make improvements to the buildings to compete with rents in the Denver downtown office market and to correct the building tenants' negative perception of the property. Also, very strict scheduling and budget constraints existing for the GSA were taken into account.

While the importance of these improvements was evident, at the same time there were historical issues related to the plans, including the design compatibility of the new entrance structure and the removal of certain character-defining features such as the canopy and bronze art column.



GENERAL ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION OF THE BYRON ROGERS FEDERAL BUILDING AND COURTHOUSE

The Byron G. Rogers Federal Building and Courthouse (originally the U. S. Courthouse and Federal Office Building) is a skillful example of an innovative style in the Modernist Tradition of architecture termed Formalism or Neo-Formalism. Each component of the Byron Rogers complex is an equally important element of the overall design. The entire ensemble is a carefully composed set of related components—a dynamic, geometric set of forms that consist of the low 5-story courthouse building pavilion and the monolithic 18-story slab of the office tower, linked by two perpendicular exterior canopies (or covered walkways) and anchored by a landscaped plaza consisting of the canopy, trees, lawn panels, and outdoor seating areas. Richness of materials and incorporation of site-specific artwork give a special quality to the complex. Construction of the complex was completed in 1965 to the design of associated and noted local architectural firms, James Sudler Associates and Fisher and Davis.



THE NATIONAL REGISTER ELIGIBILITY OF THE COURTHOUSE COMPLEX

Since the courthouse complex is less than 50 years of age, its National Register eligibility was judged under the standards for exceptional significance contained in *National Register Bulletin 22: Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties That Have Achieved Significance Within the Last Fifty Years*. Particular application was made of National Register Criterion A, qualities of significance associated with “events which have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history,” and Criterion C, qualities of significance associated with “distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values ...”

Three points of potential significance evaluated under Criterion C included: 1) the place of the courthouse complex as an example of the innovative architectural style in the Modern Movement termed Formalism (both within a national and local context); 2) its importance within the body of work of the two noted Denver architectural firms; and 3) the design as an important piece of public architecture constructed during the 1960s.

In this complex analysis, multiple sources were taken into consideration:

- an examination of the place of the Courthouse complex within the sweeping Federal design initiative inspired by the Kennedy administration in the 1960s that called for a higher quality of civic architecture;
- an examination of the courthouse complex as a formative or distinguished example of the Formalist style;
- an examination of the importance of the complex within the body of work of the two noted architectural firms responsible for its design;
- an examination of the complex as an important piece of public architecture constructed during the 1960s;
- a comprehensive site survey and visual analysis of Denver’s modern architectural context;
- interviews and meetings with experts in Denver’s modernist architectural tradition and key professionals familiar with the body of work of the two architectural firms, including the widow of James Sudler (a former

Colorado State Historic Preservation Officer); a longtime senior design associate with James Sudler Associates; and the authors of *Denver: The Modern City*;

- discussions regarding the importance of the plaza and related landscape architecture issues with professional staff at the National Park Service's Cultural Landscape Initiative;
- comparative analysis of buildings of the 1960s in the Modernist Tradition, examination of successful National Register designations for mid- to late-20th-century buildings, and examination of policy and decision-making involving exceptions to the National Register's 50-year rule (all undertaken via National Register database inquiries);

The conclusion of this intensive evaluation was that the U.S. Courthouse and Federal Office Building complex, while it was anticipated *would* fully meet the National Register criteria for listing as a property *more* than 50 years of age, *did not* meet the exceptional significance test specifically required for properties *less* than 50 years of age. However, it was determined to hold clear *future* significance as the combined work of two highly talented and recognized local architectural firms, as a skillful example of the Modernist Tradition under the newly emerging definition of Formalism, and as a strong element in the civic and city planning history of the City of Denver. These preliminary *future* points of significance could not at this time be adequately placed in context to meet the test of **exceptional** significance required for National Register listing of a property less than 50 years old. Nevertheless, there was the recognized goal of protecting the property's character-defining features for future historic designation.

RESOLUTION OF THE FIRST IMPRESSIONS CONCEPT DESIGN AND HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROPERTY

A series of meetings and design charrettes sponsored by GSA brought a broad range of stakeholders and issues together for resolution. As a result of this process, the SHPO and local experts in the Modernist architectural tradition agreed that no basis existed for justifying "exceptional significance" and the listing of the Byron Rogers complex in the National Register of Historic Places. They stressed, however, the **future** National Register eligibility and significance of the complex and considered it eligible for listing in the State Registry. Participants established a common goal of respecting the integrity of the existing property without freezing the building in time. The GSA made a commitment to address and respect the character-defining aspects of the Byron Rogers complex, discussed revisions to the existing First Impressions design concept plan to address retention of character-defining features, and received design comments from the meeting participants.

The result of the process was architectural design scheme for the courthouse complex which accomplished the following:

- A revised glass entrance pavilion was designed, a transparent box incorporating greatly improved queuing and security screening. Within it, original water features with a modified pool design -- which provided a distinct amenity -- were reinstated..
- The bronze art column, difficult to incorporate into the entrance pavilion space, was moved to the plaza and incorporated into its landscape design.
- The canopies, as key design elements linking the buildings, sheltering pedestrians, and establishing a sense of scale for the buildings, were retained. The position of the new entry pavilion was adjusted to start just behind the existing canopy. A small glass canopy was designed between the new pavilion and the existing covered walkway.
- The plaza's landscape design incorporated a new diagonal path (with landscaping) to provide clear pedestrian circulation to the new entrance pavilion. Other plaza modifications included the reinstatement of original flat lawn panels, benches, and trees.

