

# Good, Ordinary, Classical, Modern

David Cast

**A modest civic building uses Classical design, without irony, to communicate the clarity and dignity of the legal process.**

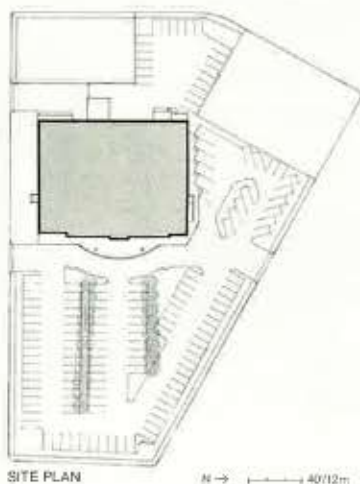
Under a reorganization law passed in 1976-7, the State of Connecticut was required to increase the number of courtrooms and offices for those courts dealing with offenses disposable at the local level. The courthouse in Manchester, designed by Allan Greenberg with Peter Kosinski Associates, is a product of this legislation. It is a quiet building that fits what is around it very comfortably; it is cheap; and, in a traditional sense, it is very easy to look at. And yet, for all this, it is a building that embodies a polemic about architectural style now, style as pure style and style as the way to express and define certain social relationships—here the legal society.

These are grandiose claims, perhaps, to make about so apparently modest a building. But modesty in our age comes only with deliberate effort, and it was only because Greenberg knew what he was doing here and why that he was able to make a building that is so quiet and yet so striking. I will begin by describing the courthouse itself and then what might be called its effects or implications.

The whole building is set on the foundations of an older structure, a supermarket (photo above right). This saved money for Connecticut (with a very cheap building, even for a renovation, some \$42 per sq ft), but it placed limits on some of what Greenberg could do. And he was not helped by the contours of the site, which slopes down from a road junction in a way that is gradual, yet completely deadening. (This is not visible in photographs.) Yet Greenberg was able to counterbalance these obstacles and, by the building he designed has in fact reinvigorated the whole area, making it once again, as neighbors testify, pleasant and interesting.

The plan of the courthouse (overleaf) is simple. The basic arrangement of the interior was fixed by the placement of the three courtrooms across almost the width of the plan. These courts vary in size and importance, that on the left being the largest and most secure, leading directly to cells and to the salyport beyond. The entrance to the courthouse is, naturally enough, in the center; from it leads a gradually widening anteroom that opens out into a broad lobby that runs right across the whole building. All the inside is immediately comprehensible; on one side the three courtrooms, on the other the offices for prosecutors, clerks, and other officials.

Yet more than clarity is intended here. The



SITE PLAN N → 40/12m

*On the angular plot, between two main streets, the existing parking has been reorganized more formally; public spaces are to east, personnel to north; bus stop is at south end of building.*

lobby is the most public part of the courthouse, it is where everyone first goes; beyond it and in front are more confidential and sequestered spaces. And if here we can think of metaphors, it is possible that the lobby and the entrance can stand for one aspect of law, its accessibility, while the courts and the offices around them suggest that the disposing of law is more private, more considered.

Perhaps necessity was the mother of invention here. But in giving form to this building, Greenberg used a language that invites such speculations, the Classical style, with all the details and implications of that language: outside, the firmly centralized front (note that the façade, following the lines of the earlier building, is not set in the true center of the front); the articulation of the façade, the rustication at the door, the portico, the flagpoles, the six well-spaced and Wren-like windows to left and right; inside, the lobby with its barrel vault, the terrazzo floor made up of alternating squares of light and dark, the doors to each courtroom with their Tuscan columns and pilasters that seem in their solidity to recall Christopher Wren or Inigo Jones.

The façade is strong and imposing, a design that reminds us—an allusion Greenberg accepts—of something like the Porta Nuova, Verona, by Michele Sanmichele (photo below). City gates have two fronts. Greenberg



Porta Nuova, Verona.

David Cast, recently a visiting fellow at Cornell, is now associate professor of art history at Bryn Mawr.



The shell of a 1962 supermarket was remodeled into a courthouse (before and after photos, opposite) within the existing foundation lines and retaining most walls, including the white brick "wings" that flank the new Classical front (above). In the main lobby (right), columns are original structural ones, encased in Tuscan. Quotations on frieze, selected by Greenberg:

The end of the law is not to abolish or to restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom: for in all the states of created beings capable of law, where there is no law there is no freedom—John Locke.

Laws are made for men of ordinary understanding and should therefore be construed by the ordinary rules of common sense. Their meaning is not to be sought for in metaphysical subtleties—Thomas Jefferson.



here looks at the interior side, the more generous side, with its human scale and the legend across the frieze that says clearly what the building is. The program of this building is consistent. The citizen in his civic role as prisoner or witness or juror or officer or judge is given a building, set in a comprehensible scale. Yet the forms of the courthouse remind him, however well or badly he recognizes them, of the tradition and the imperatives of all that takes place inside.

The idea of building now in a Classical style is something Greenberg has supported on a number of occasions; an earlier, much noted example of his work in this mode was the portico in the exhibition "Buildings for Best," shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1980 (P/A, Feb. 1980, p. 24). Could he be truly serious, the critic Michael Sorkin asked of

Courthouse, Manchester, Ct



Baltimore County Courts Building, Towson, Md.

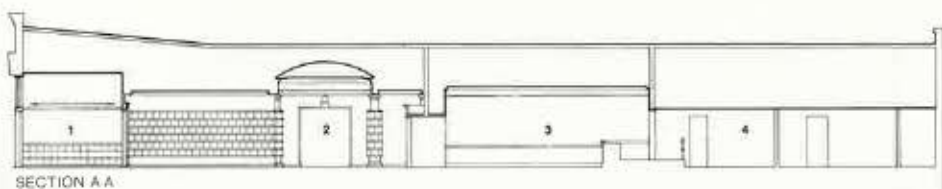


Tangipahoa Parish Courthouse, Amite, La.

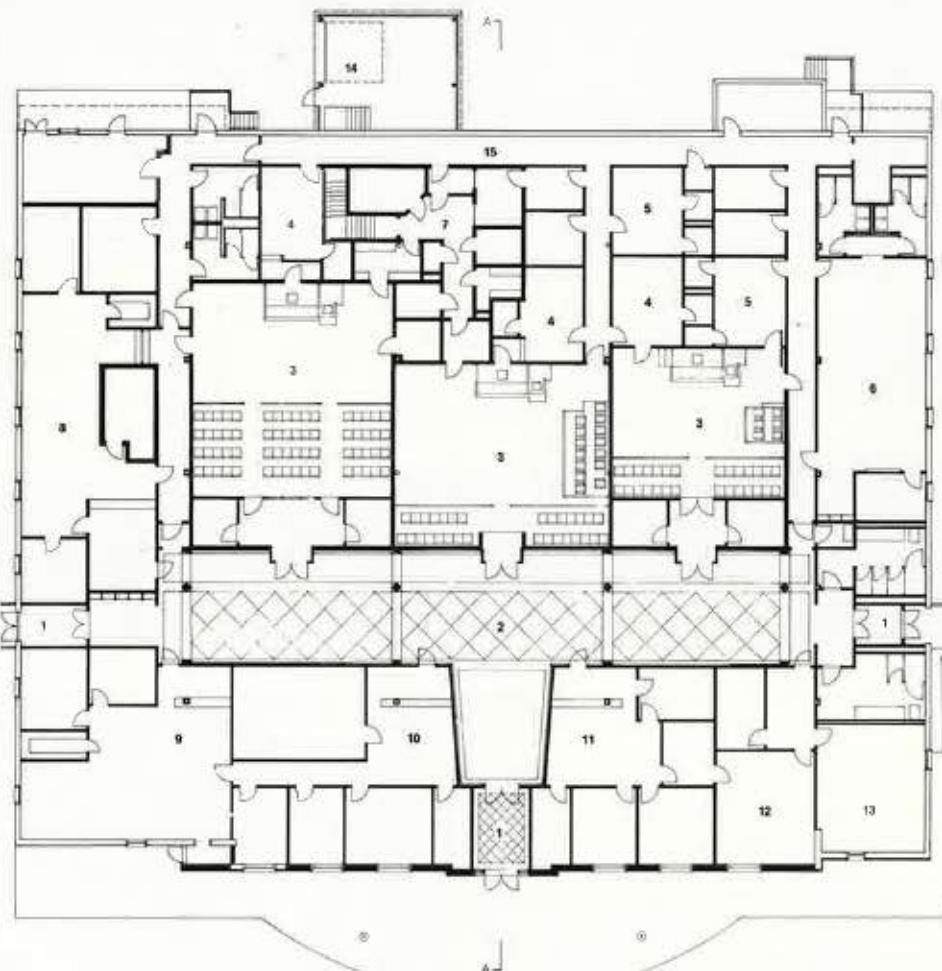
that? The answer to this question must come from what we determine to be the effects of this manner of design. If we approve of these effects, then seriousness is not an issue. If we do not, seriousness is no justification. I would like to sketch on a series of qualities that might be seen in the Manchester courthouse, some familiar, some less so for architecture, some a part of the usual language of design, some a part of a general discourse about architecture of what was once called—if we think of Perrault's phrase "le bon sens"—common opinion.

**Age:** All architecture, wrote Wren in a phrase that seems very distant now, aims at Eternity. Much of Modern architecture seems somewhat uncomfortable with what we might call sensible time. Consider the simple question here of materials: brick, stone, wood. Are not, by contrast, the vast travertine expanses of the Albany Mall (P/A, May 1979, p. 106) too intimidating, too much out of time? Or the delicate steel and glass elements of the Johnson Glass House too abstract, too fragile for an idea of changing time, of a time lived in and defined by people? One visitor to Manchester remarked with delight that the building seemed to have been there quite some time already; by implication, we might add that it would stay there for a reasonable time. Is not the Law a part of human time and yet, in all senses, beyond any one person's knowledge of time?

**Genre:** There exists a rich history of courts and courthouses, one almost as old in America as the practice of law itself. Manchester takes note of this while, for practical reasons perhaps, acceding to other references from city forms, from Italian, that is Roman, traditions. In much of Modern architecture the idea of genre has been sadly weakened, the formal language used being the same for all types of buildings, whether large or small, whether public or private. Consider two recent courts, one from Tangipahoa Parish, Louisiana (1969) by J.J. Desmond and W.C. Burkes (photo above), the other the Baltimore County Courts Building, Towson, Maryland (1973) by W.L. and T.C. Gaudreau (photo above). Whatever their merits, we can ask where in the Louisiana building is there any



SECTION A A



FLOOR PLAN

formal device that marks this structure off from all the great wordly buildings around it, where in the Towson building is the entrance, where then the possibility of metaphor, of allusion? Manchester answers problems such as these.

**Hierarchy:** If it is fitting that the form of the courthouse be distinct from that of what is around it, it is equally appropriate that the various parts of its interior be distinguished. At Manchester, the courts are the most evidently decorated spaces, wood panels on the walls, warm colors at the ceiling and fluorescent lights that are arranged in a pattern of stars. The judges' chambers and the rooms of the officers are rendered in simple, white plaster. The lobby, with its columns and pilasters, has a band of pellata marble on the walls and a sequence of richly decorated doorways that lead to the courts (the simple public exits at either end are left unornamented). The distinctions here between the significance of the spaces is done within a common scale, by accumulating detail rather than enlarging the parts. This saves money since, once the Classical elements are included, standard modern fixtures can be used, as in the doors to the courts and the tubes used in the starlike courtroom lights.

**Legend**

- 1 Vestibule
- 2 Lobby
- 3 Courtrooms
- 4 Judge's chambers
- 5 Jury deliberation
- 6 Jury assembly
- 7 Cells
- 8 Clerk
- 9 Prosecutor
- 10 Family division
- 11 Public defender
- 12 Hearing room
- 13 Expansion
- 14 Sallyport
- 15 Staff corridor



*Stripped-down Classicism of courtrooms (left) shows budget restraint, is capped by suspended ceilings and star-shaped fluorescent fixtures that owe more to sculptor Don Flavin, whose work interests Greenberg, than to Vitruvius. Arched windows light private offices at front of building (above).*

**Decorum:** This is at once a moral and a psychological quality. Greenberg chose to work here with Classical forms, since he believes this language grants the building an appropriate character. The forms of Classical architecture represent, perhaps, one among many sets of languages, and as such it can be used in part, or at whim; this surely is how Robert Venturi uses the Ionic column in his extension to the Oberlin Art Gallery (*P/A*, Oct. 1977, p. 50) or Michael Graves includes Classical elements in his recent scheme for the Public Service Building in Portland, Or (p. 108). Perhaps there is a place for this whimsy. But, in the terms of the Manchester building, such citations must always seem somewhat private, arbitrary, and idiosyncratic. At Manchester, the choice of the architectural language seems accountable and fitting; it is, in this sense, decorous.

**Conviction:** This quality is close to decorum. All languages can be degraded, though perhaps Classicism survives such abasement better than most. Greenberg knows his history of Classicism well and he is able to work with it strongly and, as we would now say, authentically. There is much dullness in modern Classical design, and there is also, more recently, a hint of false drama. Dullness, for example, in the work of someone like Sir Herbert Baker or, in an instance closer to home, in the articulation of the forms of the New York University Law School (1951) by Eggers & Higgins. Drama in the Mathews Street House (1978) by Thomas Gordon Smith (p. 98) and in the unfinished AT&T Building in New York by Philip Johnson. The architectural forms Greenberg uses here seem simple and forthright, certainly more full-blooded than Baker or Eggers & Higgins. It seems a matter of true belief; and it is from this that Greenberg is able to give the forms dignity and conviction.

**Delight:** This is an old category, but one that has slipped from our grasp in recent years. The pleasure expressed by the craftsmen working on this building was obvious: the mason laying the marble in the lobby, the carpenters matching, cutting and lapping the details of the plinths and string-courses and wooden pilasters, the bricklayers outside aligning courses in the bricks and stones of the façade. Why mention this? Because it suggests, perhaps, an analogy to the response such a manner of design elicits from everyone, a way of seeing the details, of matching them to the actions of their own particular lives, delight here in such details leading us to appropriate the building to our own experience, to make us responsible. A more transcendental mode of design—and much of Modern architecture is transcendental in its idea—demands a different response, one that transports us beyond all these minute but crucial human positions.

**Utility:** Again an old category, another one that has slipped from us. This is a small, modest building, cheap to run because it uses no new technology. It is useful because it is able to provide us with a number of simple, yet cherished elements; windows at fitting points, doors that lead directly to the points we might wish to get to. But this is also a useful building in another sense, that it is a manner of design that runs along the line of least resistance, that it is the simplest and least determined answer to what a courthouse is. Nothing here is arbitrarily new, nothing here is idiosyncratically or identifiably new; nothing here—to use a German phrase of great meaning—imposes itself too much. That is true utility; it is perhaps a quality, like the others here, that is forgotten often in the practice and discourse about the practice of Modern architecture. □

#### **Data**

**Project:** Judicial District of Hartford Courthouse at Manchester, Ct.

**Architects:** Allan Greenberg; associated architect, Peter Kosinski Associates.

**Client:** Judicial Dept. of the State of Connecticut.

**Site:** land occupied by existing supermarket, including parking, service dock, etc.

**Program:** remodeling 23,000 sq ft of largely undivided supermarket structure into courts and offices (see plan).

**Structural system:** existing steel columns, open-web steel joists, and steel deck.

**Major materials:** brick, limestone, and plaster façade; pellata marble, terrazzo floor, plaster vault in white pine moldings in lobby; gypsum board, suspended acoustical ceilings, synthetic tile floor, wood trim elsewhere.

**Consultants:** Besier, Gibble, & Quirin (structural); Walter McIlveen & Associates (mechanical).

**Cost:** about \$42 per sq ft, including landscaping and built-in furnishings, not including fees.

**Photography:** Allan Greenberg.