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opinion

Barnes-Gelt: Justice center doomed by urban design drama

By Susan Barnes-Gelt

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Last weekend, four people visiting from New Jersey were relaxing on the benches in front of Denver's new Van Cise-Simonet Detention Center. When I asked whether they liked Denver's new justice center, they were puzzled. Why did the city locate the office building, and not the courthouse, on the more prominent site on the west side of the big plaza? I explained that the building behind them was actually a jail and the stone and glass structure they were looking at was Denver's new courthouse.

Therein lies the dilemma.

Civic structures, symbolic of the community's values, have an obligation to history, context and the future. Consider Colorado's Capitol (1894), the City and County Building (1932), and the Alfred A. Arraj Federal Courthouse (2002).

Though commissioned in different centuries to accommodate different programs, the three buildings are timeless, yet still belong to their time and context. Each is beautifully detailed, monumental in scale and four-sided — celebrating the procession of arrival and entry without ignoring the other building elevations. These three buildings set a standard for civic architecture in Denver.

The Van Cise-Simonet Detention Center and the Lindsey Flannigan Courthouse mark the first expansion of the Civic Center district's north-south civic axis since completion of the City and County Building nearly 90 years ago. Following years of political maneuverings and failed campaigns, Denver taxpayers in 2005 approved a \$378 million bond issue to build a downtown justice center — a pre-adjudication detention facility, parking garage and courthouse.

The \$160 million detention center opened in mid-April. The 1,500-bed urban jail meets numerous challenges with dignity and grace. Architect-of-record Oz, design architect Hartman-Cox and detention consultant Ricci-Greene balanced rigorous program demands, neighborhood anxiety and disciplined design guidelines and review with a serious, contemporary civic structure. The building responds to context and the historic precedent of the Civic Center district with dignity. Thoughtful detailing of the buff-colored Indiana limestone, variation of mass and void on the Colfax and 14th Street facades and the strong entry facing Tooley Plaza and the Lindsey Flannigan Courthouse contribute to an important

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civic building that will stand the test of time.

The design of the courthouse, scheduled for completion in July, emerged from an urban design melodrama. Following a heated competition, temperamental architect Steven Holl was selected to lead the design. He teamed up with local designer Klipp and, following months of missed deadlines and budget battles, Holl left and Klipp took over.

Klipp faced numerous challenges. Design had to begin anew, but the construction calendar was set.

Unfortunately, the building that's emerged from this drama fails on several fronts. Dominated by an undulating glass curtain wall and glass-clad jury selection room, the primary façade of the courthouse tries to communicate transparency. Lack of detailing, a pitifully small and commercial-looking front door and the absence of historic or contextual relevance transform what's intended to be a grand gesture into a cliché. The 14th and Colfax Avenue facades are flat, interrupted by five thin horizontal windows, sandwiched between vertical blocks of windows. Neither artful detailing nor rhythm are expressed in the white Alabama limestone veneer or utilitarian window frames.

The west façade faces Speer Boulevard, and the elevation most people will experience disappoints. The rear of the building houses judges' chambers. An odd assortment of aluminum-framed windows, many sporting

eyebrows and east-facing half-blinders have nothing to do with the front of the building. This elevation relates to the 14th and Colfax Avenue facades only in its flat, suburban character and lack of gravitas.

Perhaps our city's infatuation with star architects will be tempered by this experience. Holl was the wrong choice for a publicly funded building with an inflexible budget and schedule; and Klipp, with scant urban/civic portfolio, was in a tough situation. In the meantime, let's hope that a maturing landscape, public art and human activity can mitigate the lack of civic engagement communicated by Denver's new courthouse.

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