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Before the Jersey Barrier: Public Access and Public Safety in Federal Buildings

The chilling events of September 11, 2001, and the bombing of the Murragh Federal Building and the World Trade Center in the years before, have forever changed the way people think about security in urban areas. Just as cities have developed ways to turn back spiraling crime rates, now they must find strategies for bracing public facilities and landmarks against the possibility of deliberate, terroristic attacks.

The U.S. General Service Administration's Public Buildings Service, responsible for maintaining the inventory of federal office buildings and courthouses across the nation, is squarely in the middle of this issue. Because of the activities that occur in them and because of their impact on the cityscape, federal buildings play an important role in shaping our civil society. The way they are designed and managed as civic assets is of utmost public significance: their importance can make them targets for people or organizations who wish to air their grievances.

Since last September, design professionals have had vigorous debates about designing safe cities, about how architecture and site planning can be configured to discourage the use of buildings as targets and to improve their chances of survival if attacked. One of the most common short-term outcomes has been to increase the distance between buildings and potential threats, by closing off public spaces, shutting down parking lanes on surrounding streets and creating perimeters around federal buildings with bollards, heavy-duty planters or so-called "Jersey barriers."

But GSA building managers and the Federal Protective Service, charged with providing security in federal buildings, are also learning that security does not stop at the Jersey barrier; in fact, it probably

doesn't even start there. Just as critical are the arrangements by which people—from federal employees to contractors, from visitors to deliverers—are given access to a building.

Some situations are extraordinarily complex. The Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington, D.C., for example, hosts not only conferences, a District of Columbia visitors' center and a food court for tourists, but also frequent visits from the President, foreign dignitaries and other high-level officials.

GSA has also more typical spaces, such as the plazas and atriums of federal office buildings and courthouses. In other places, GSA continues to accommodate large gatherings in both indoor and outdoor spaces. In Syracuse, evening concerts are staged on a plaza that surrounds and runs underneath an elevated federal building and courthouse. In Chicago, a farmers market, arts and crafts fairs and even a large ethnic festival take place regularly on the plaza at a federal building in the Loop. In Tacoma, weddings and other celebrations occur in the rotunda of an historic train station that has been converted for use as a courthouse.

In these cases, heightened levels of security are provided not so much by barriers, but by careful arrangements for monitoring public access. These policies are worked out, site by site, patiently and deliberately, not only to provide for security but also to allow the activities to function as they ordinarily would. GSA and its colleagues, from the managers of the Reagan Building/ITC to the non-profit group that runs events in Syracuse, are developing a new art and science of public-spirited public space management in this time of heightened caution.



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State of the Art Management

The Reagan Building/ITC is an extraordinary federal building in many respects, not the least of which is the sheer amount of public activity that occurs there. The building includes a food court, restaurant and the official District of Columbia visitors' center, all open to the public; offices for federal agencies and private businesses; and conference and meeting facilities where nearly 1,200 events—from a summit of ministers from NATO nations to trade forums to weddings—are held each year. Woodrow Wilson Plaza/Daniel Patrick Moynihan Place, just outside, hosts a daily lunchtime performance series in the summer as well as special events like Hollywood-style film premieres and cooking extravaganzas.

Ironically, this busy 3.1 million square foot building is located in the heart of the largest office federal compound in the country—the seven-square-block Federal Triangle. For the most part it is a quiet area, wedged between the bustle of Washington's downtown retail district and the tourist-thronged attractions on the Mall; except for the National Archives and Old Post Office Building a few blocks down Pennsylvania Avenue, there are no major public facilities nearby.

The diverse activities in the Reagan Building/ITC (the second largest federal office building, after the Pentagon) are not only an exemplar of GSA's Good Neighbor policies but also an important part of the building's finances. Unlike most federal buildings, its construction was funded via long-term debt, and the ITC (the public component) receives no annual operating appropriation. Rents from federal tenants and ITC revenues (rents from private sector tenants and fees for special events) help retire the debt and also contributes toward the



management and operating costs of operating the building.

Security concerns have always been paramount here, because of the building's location (on Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the Capitol), because the building was opened after the Murragh bombing and due to the high concentration of federal workers in the building (which houses the headquarters of the U.S. Customs Service, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, as well as a component of the Environmental Protection Agency). GSA's Federal Protective Service (FPS) and the manager of the Trade Center's public spaces and events, have evolved an in-depth, yet straightforward, protocol for maintaining necessary security while allowing all manner of public activities.

Security occurs in layers. Since the building is nestled in the Federal Triangle compound, only two sides are open to the street, and vehicles are made to keep their distance by on-street parking restrictions and bollards that prevent access to the plaza. GSA has a more attractive perimeter security concept plan that will provide the necessary security while making it more visually appealing and more accessible on a human scale.

The guards (who are also a GSA contractor force) at the building's seven entrances and security cameras that monitor the streets and entrances "are our security perimeter. They are like a fence, just an invisible fence," explained Douglas Avery, GSA's Deputy Security Manager for the building.

Anybody can stroll into the plaza or walk into Michael Jordan's restaurant, which is tucked into a pavillion on one



side of the Reagan Building/ITC, without passing through any special checking. To get into the building's public spaces, visitors must pass through an airport-style checkpoint. And to enter one of the towers that house federal and private offices, visitors must pass through an second airport-style checkpoint.

This system provides a base level of

Opposite: Afternoon concert on Woodrow Wilson Plaza. Photo by Photographics.

Top: National security conference, Ronald Reagan Building/International Trade Center. Photo by Freed Photography.

Bottom: Public food court, Ronald Reagan Building/International Trade Center. Photo courtesy Trade Center Management Associates.

security for the entire building while allowing the Federal agencies to tailor additional levels of inspection to their own needs, Avery said. "To a person not used to security, it can be disconcerting, but once inside you can walk anywhere," said Don Shapiro, who manages events and security for the trade center manager.

Deliveries are carefully choreographed by the FPS, the guard service contractor and the trade center manager, who also oversees the garage operations. Delivery trucks must be screened off-site, at the Southeast Federal Center, then sealed for the trip downtown. Then, when the trucks park at the loading dock, someone has to stay with them at all times. In addition, the trade center manager does all catering in-house and has developed a list of preferred vendors for other services; the manager collects background information about their employees and sends it to FPS for review and approval.

"It's not taking the easiest route, efficiency is not the first thing we look at here," Shapiro acknowledged. "But once you follow the procedure, it's easy, and there's no delay." While it may add a bit to the cost of doing

business at the ITC, many clients think the trade-off is fair for the level of security the building offers.

In practice, the key to making these arrangements work has been flexibility. The trade center manager and FPS have weekly planning meetings, and the building's security committee meets every two weeks, so there is plenty of opportunity to anticipate and address special situations. "We do try to balance security needs with the building's legislative mission to be open and accessible to the public," Avery said. Shapiro agreed: "There's lots of give and take."

For example, one client requested an reception that would take place both in the building's atrium and on the plaza, under a tent. To accomplish that, guests were screened at the building entrance and given a special wristband, which allowed them to move out to the plaza and back inside. The plaza area was configured with a secure perimeter, which was patrolled by guards paid for by the client.

Another event involved so many guests that they could not be screened efficiently at the building entrance. So the event sponsor asked guests to assemble at a different location, where they were screened and put on buses, which were escorted to the building.

Like many federal buildings, after Sept. 11 "this place was a fortress," Avery said. Everyone entering the building was screened, with the result that "people were lined up to Virginia just to get inside, and that was not acceptable." But because the building had such thorough procedures in place, it could get back to normal in short order. The parking garage was closed for only two days, and a wedding went on as scheduled the very next weekend.

Business dropped off briefly last fall, but over the twelve months business has been stronger than it was in

the previous year—compared to a general drop off in the hospitality business in Washington over the last year. This is a tribute both to the building and to the spirit of flexibility and partnership in which GSA’s management and its contractors operate.

Syracuse: Party in the Plaza Parties On

The “Party in the Plaza” at the Hanley Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse is more than a nineteen-year tradition; it’s a lynchpin of nightlife in Syracuse, New York.

Every Wednesday in the summer, starting about five p.m., the party fills up the plaza that surrounds the courthouse/office complex and even flows underneath an elevated section of the building. Up to 10,000 people turn out to listen to bands like ... , dance and munch on all manner of festival food.

“This makes or breaks businesses in downtown Syracuse, it’s like another weekend night,” explained William A. Cooper, president of the UpDowntowners, the volunteer group that organizes the events. On top of that, profits are distributed among other local groups to help them organize additional public events downtown—last year fifteen groups split \$48,000.

Security for the event was tightened after the Oklahoma City bombing, according to Cooper and Joan Grennan, GSA’s property manager for the building. Since then, for example, city police and bomb-sniffing dogs have inspected every vehicle that comes on the plaza—including delivery trucks, trailers for food vendors, even the local radio station’s promotional van.

“This year, though, we had some increased concerns,” Grennan said. “The chief judge invited us in to see if this should be a ‘go’ or a ‘no go.’ He

was interested in hearing what additional security measures they were going to provide,” Grennan recalled. Relocation wasn’t an option; no other downtown public space had the right configuration or facilities. So the UpDowntowners, in conjunction with GSA, the FPS, the chief judge and the U.S. Marshalls (which oversee security for courts), mapped out additional security measures.

One step was to bolster the presence of security officers. More than a dozen uniformed city police are on the scene, as well as FPS officers and contract security, with the UpDowntowners picking up the extra cost. Security risks were reduced by moving portable toilets and Dumpsters farther from the building, and by banning parking on streets surrounding the plaza during the event.

Party-goers have had to get used to a new ban on backpacks at the event. Security staff observe everybody who enters the site, which has four access points, but there are no metal detectors or searches. “We don’t stop everyone, we do visual checks. When we see people with a backpack, we go over and ask them to not to bring it onto the premises,” Cooper said.

Finally, the UpDowntowners increased the number of volunteers who mingle with the crowd and provided them all with special anti-terrorist training. Under the guidance of a retired army officer, “we review what to look for in terms of suspects, terrorists, suspicious characters,” Cooper explained.

Complaints about the new arrangements have been minimal, according to Cooper. “The security is not obvious. Some people complain that they’ve come on the bus and have no place to put their backpacks. But most people drive and they can leave it in their cars.”

A key reason these arrangements

could be worked out effectively is UpDowntowners’ solid track record of working collaboratively with GSA and the building tenants. “As part of their planning every year, they put together a proposal about the organization, their licenses, their insurance, and they would talk to every judge in the building and a lot of politicians, and get their blessings, in letter form, for us,” Grennan said.

Another reason is that the event was too important for Syracuse to cancel. “When it started, there was a beat up slum section a few blocks away,” Grennan recalled. “Now that area has come back, with boutiques and bars, and those places advertise in the paper to come see them after the party. This has brought the area up.”

No argument from Cooper: “This is a good thing for the federal government. It says, ‘We’re doing business as usual, we’re not being held hostage due to threats. We are taking precautions, but we are doing business as usual.’”