Civic Business:
Mies's Chicago Federal Center in Context

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In 1895, the United States Congress appropriated funds to replace a fifteen-year-old federal building in central Chicago with larger quarters for an evolving U.S. government, which was becoming increasingly professional and regulatory as it attempted to help manage nineteenth-century industrial America.[1] Buffeted by a national economic depression and anxiously awaiting the commencement of the building project, Chicagoans wondered why the U.S. government did not rapidly erect a "Chicago-style" steel-frame building modeled on the commercial skyscrapers that had recently filled the downtown Loop. An official of the U.S. Supervising Architect's Office curtly explained to a journalist: "This office does not believe in the Chicago style. It won't do for the government. . . . The United States erects monuments. It would not be dignified to erect a steel-frame building. The government puts up heavy masonry structures and it puts them up to stay."[2] The new U.S. government building commission went to Chicago architect Henry Ives Cobb. He did deploy a steel frame for support but clad the building in 450,000 cubic feet of Maine granite, topped by a massive, 297-foot-high dome that dominated the surrounding skyscrapers (Figure 1).[3]

As it turned out, Cobb's federal building, completed in 1905, did not "stay" as a permanent landmark. In 1958, the U.S. Congress again appropriated funds for a newer Chicago Federal Center to accommodate an even larger U.S. government bureaucracy. The office of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe developed a design for two strikingly modern glass-and-steel skyscrapers plus a low post office pavilion, all arranged around open-air pedestrian plazas (Figure 2). The canons of traditional civic architecture, represented by the domed and ornamented Cobb federal building, were set aside in favor of materials and forms cued by the spare regular geometries of the Chicago skyscraper's steel-cage construction, the very forms rejected as undignified by the U.S. government sixty-five years earlier. This essay explores the Chicago Federal Center, a project in which architects commissioned by the government moved from rejection to acceptance of a design vocabulary associated with commerce and the skyscraper and its tectonic system, and deployed those forms to represent government in postwar America.

Typically, scholarship on the Chicago Federal Center locates its buildings and open spaces within the internal development of Mies's architecture. Architectural historian Phyllis Lambert deems the center a "maturation," while Dietrich Neumann's recent, "less heroic" biography situates it among the "increasingly repetitive" formulas of Mies's final decades.[4] Thomas Leslie relates the Federal Center's high-rise construction to Chicago's politics and economics.[5] In the present essay we develop and depart from these approaches. We further localize the Chicago Federal Center within the city's postwar urban planning schemes and immediate environs—specifically, several civic center proposals that combined skyscrapers and plazas in the decade before Mies's Federal Center commission. We also historicize the center nationally and politically in the context of the rise and contradictions of the American administrative state's bureaucratic management of economics and social welfare. Ultimately, we argue, the Chicago Federal Center's design sought to accommodate, symbolize, and

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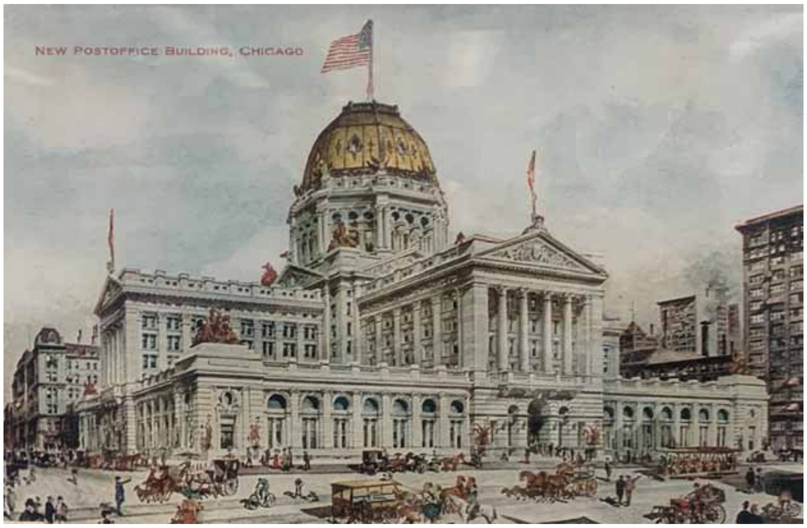

Figure 1 Henry Ives Cobb, Chicago Federal Building, Chicago, 1896–1905 (postcard; collection of Daniel M. Abramson).

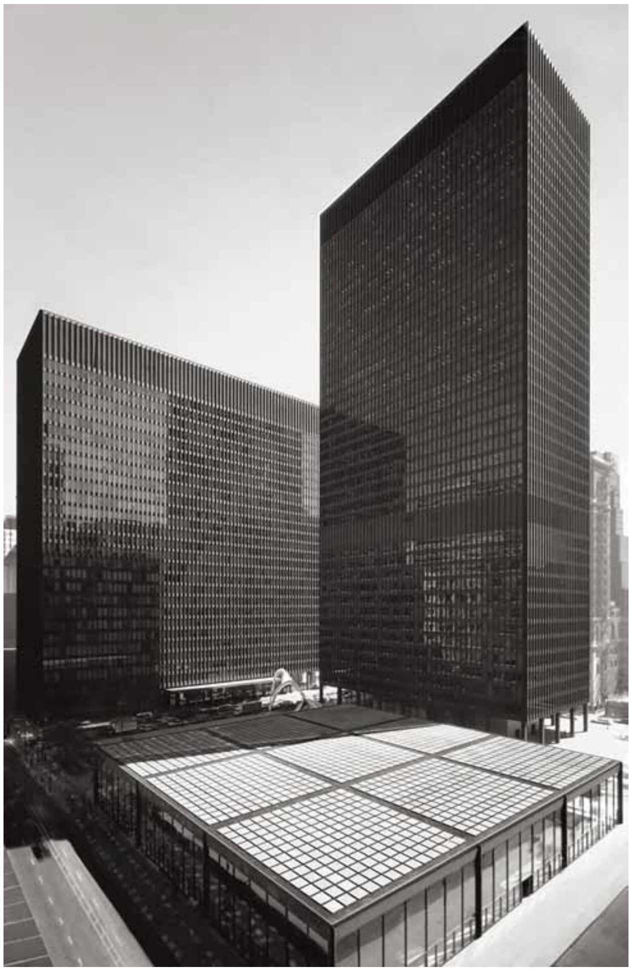

Figure 2 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago Federal Center, 1959–74, U.S. Post Office in the foreground, John C. Kluczynski Federal Building at right, and Everett M. Dirksen Courthouse at left (U.S. General Services Administration).

synthesize the hybrid identity of American government at this moment, as both businesslike in its efficiency and public in its civicness.

Cobb's Federal Building

When reviewing Cobb's federal building design, *Harper's Weekly* highlighted the "pyramidization" of the building mass, with its ornate dome, as central to its civic expression.[6] Occupying a full Loop block encompassed by Clark, Adams, and Dearborn Streets and Jackson Boulevard, the two-story arcaded base housed mainly post office functions. Above, six stories more of courts and federal offices filled four rectangular wings forming a Greek cross, each with pedimented Roman temple façades fronting triple-height interior courtrooms. Inside, at the wings' central crossing, citizens could gaze upward more than a dozen stories into the tremendous rotunda void, nearly the height of the 300-foot structure (Figure 3).

In downtown Chicago, the dome of Cobb's U.S. government building established, at a glance, a civic realm standing apart from surrounding skyscrapers and bustling, pervasive commercialism. It drew local inspiration from Richard Morris Hunt's design of the domed Administration Building that headed the Court of Honor at Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, a distinctive vision of governing authority, social stability, and cultural unity in a coordinated civic landscape insulated from discordant contemporary urbanism (Figure 4).[7] When Daniel H. Burnham, lead planner of the Columbian Exposition and early advocate of the City Beautiful, turned his attention to the larger 1909 Plan of Chicago, he envisioned a similar central grouping of classically designed public buildings around a towering domed structure dominating and disciplining a commercial, socially turbulent metropolis (Figure 5). Justifying the plan, he stated, "The time has come to bring order out of the chaos incident to the influx of people of many nationalities without common traditions or habits of life."[8] Cobb's design had codified at the level of a single public building the idealized space of this imagined, unified, peaceable American city. Cobb's dome, however, commanded not separate

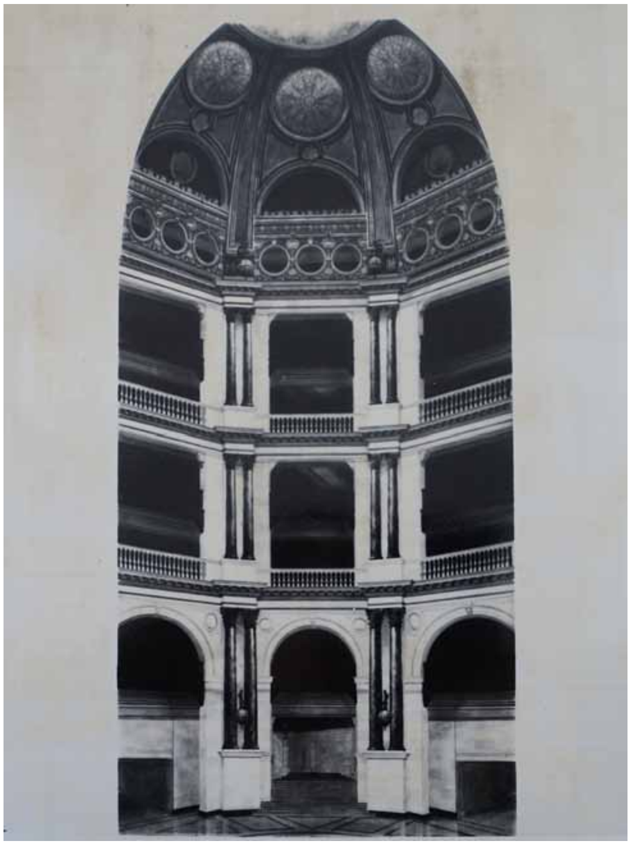

Figure 3 Henry Ives Cobb, Chicago Federal Building, 1896–1905, interior rotunda (National Archives).

structures but its own subordinate attached wings. Cobb's building also filled an entire city block, unlike commercial buildings. The symmetry and simplicity of large-scale composition, with the harmony of the wings as a setting for the dome towering above its neighbors, established the Chicago Federal Building's distinctive civic expression.

By the 1950s, however, critics viewed these gestures of monumentality as outmoded. The *Chicago Tribune* in 1958 labeled the half-century-old federal building "one of the most inefficient public buildings in the world."[9] Franklin Floete, the head of the General Services Administration overseeing U.S. property, insisted that the building's "low efficiency (ratio of net area to gross area)" was responsible for its high operating costs and "functional obsolescence."[10] The same design viewed as contributing civic grandeur ca. 1900 now embodied spatial inefficiency in the 1950s.

U.S. Administrative State

In the intervening decades, the U.S. government's workforce had also grown by leaps and bounds. New executive departments had been added (Commerce in 1903, Labor in 1913), as well as semi-independent regulatory agencies (Interstate Commerce Commission in 1887 and Federal Trade Commission in 1914). This was the beginning of what would become known as the administrative state, efforts to enhance and regulate the nation's economy more or less autonomously, isolated from political interests. Progressive Era principles emphasized efficient, rational, expert professional management for a government civil service independent of cronyism and protected from interference by the executive and legislative branches of government.[11] The emergencies of the Great Depression and World War II extended the administrative state's purview of social welfare and national defense and led to permanent enlargements in the federal bureaucracy, from half a million civilian employees in 1913 to more than two million in 1947. The 1950s were a "golden age" of the American administrative state—a term used nonpejoratively in the United States beginning in the 1940s. It was generally trusted to steer the country through depression and war, operating not just in Washington but nationally in conjunction with state and local governments, themselves also growing at this time. Exemplifying the modern U.S. administrative state in this decade, the old Chicago Federal Building housed, in addition to courts and a remaining branch post office, a number of federal agencies, including the Department of Defense, the Federal Communications Commission, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the Housing and Home Finance Agency, the Weather Bureau, the Department of the Treasury, congressional offices, the State Department's Passport Agency, and the General Services Administration.[12] The last, established in 1949, oversaw most U.S. government physical assets, including architecture.

However, there was always skepticism about the U.S. administrative state. Alongside general deep-seated suspicion of central government (a function of American individualism) and congenital antipathy to state regulation (per market capitalism) there was also the particular "antidemocratic potential" of the administrative state, in the words of historian Anne M. Kornhauser. This potential was seen in its "cult of expertise," its lack of accountability to the other branches of government, and its application of business techniques to government administration at the expense of civic values of equality and well-being.[13] Repeated efforts to rein in the federal administrative state included those of the 1947–49 Hoover Commission, appointed by Congress, to "streamline" the federal bureaucracy, in this case to curtail it by making it more businesslike. The *New York Times* reported in 1949 that "government is by far the biggest business in the country," signaling how efficiency legitimated postwar American governance, perhaps even over democracy.[14]

Meanwhile, at the Cobb federal building, the 400,000 square feet of space for fewer than two thousand

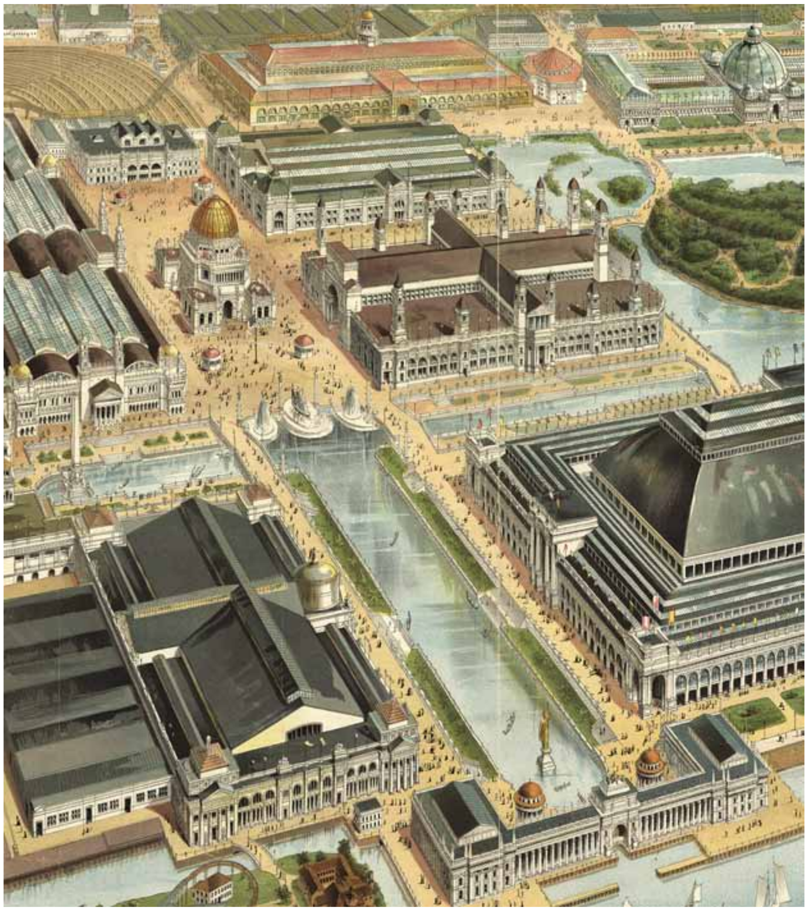

Figure 4 Rand, McNally and Company, "Bird's-Eye View of the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago," 1893, detail showing the Court of Honor with its domed Administration Building (Geography and Maps Division, Library of Congress).

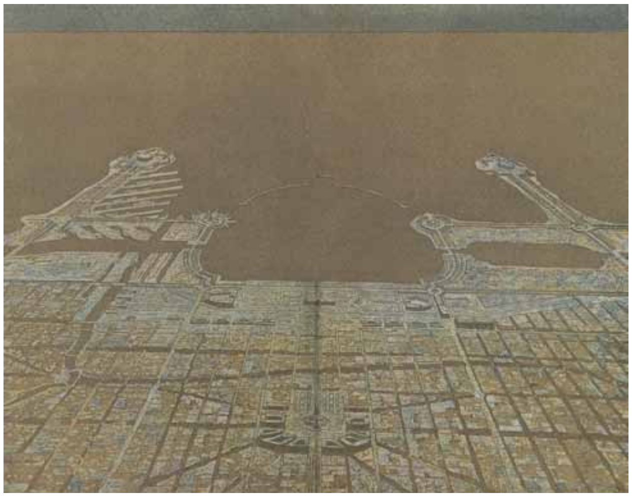

Figure 5 Daniel H. Burnham, proposed Chicago Civic Center, looking east to Grant Park and Lake Michigan, 1909 (Jules Guerin, delineator; Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett, *Plan of Chicago* [Chicago: Commercial Club of Chicago, 1909], plate 137; Library of Congress).

workers was completely insufficient for the twenty thousand Chicago-area federal administrative state employees. Already in 1949 these employees were spread out in thirty-five mostly rented locations among other white-collar workers in downtown commercial office buildings and skyscrapers (Figure 6).[15] Moving forward, the architectural tasks would be to consolidate and accommodate functionally the enlarged federal administrative state, while trying to synthesize symbolically its hybrid identity as both efficient, businesslike administration and civic, governmental institution.

First Skyscrapers

Already in the 1930s, plans were afoot to modify the Cobb federal building. In 1934, Chicagoans presented to Congress and President Franklin D. Roosevelt a design by local architect Victor Harold Stromquist that would replace the building's domed tower with a forty-three-story shaft to house more workers atop the retained classical base and office-court wings; the total height would be nearly equal to the city's tallest building, the Board of Trade (Figure 7). This scheme mirrored recently built state capitol and city hall skyscrapers in Nebraska, Louisiana, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, whose towers' resemblance to commercial structures led a writer for the *Atlanta Constitution* to assert in 1921 that they represented "a new conception of government" as "nothing other than a big corporation."[16] Such

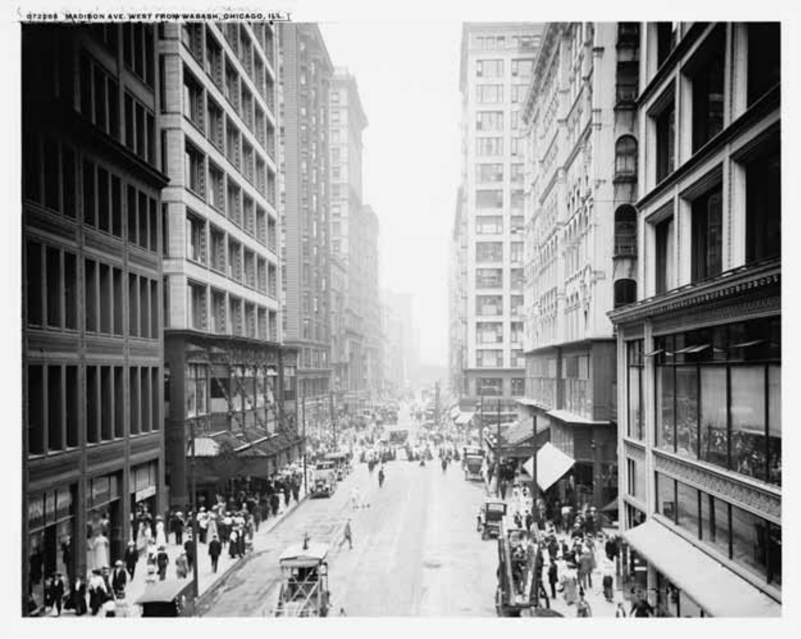

Figure 6 Madison Street looking west from Wabash Avenue, Chicago, ca. 1910–20; the tallest building at right is Holabird & Roche's Boston Store, 1905 (Detroit Publishing Company; Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress).

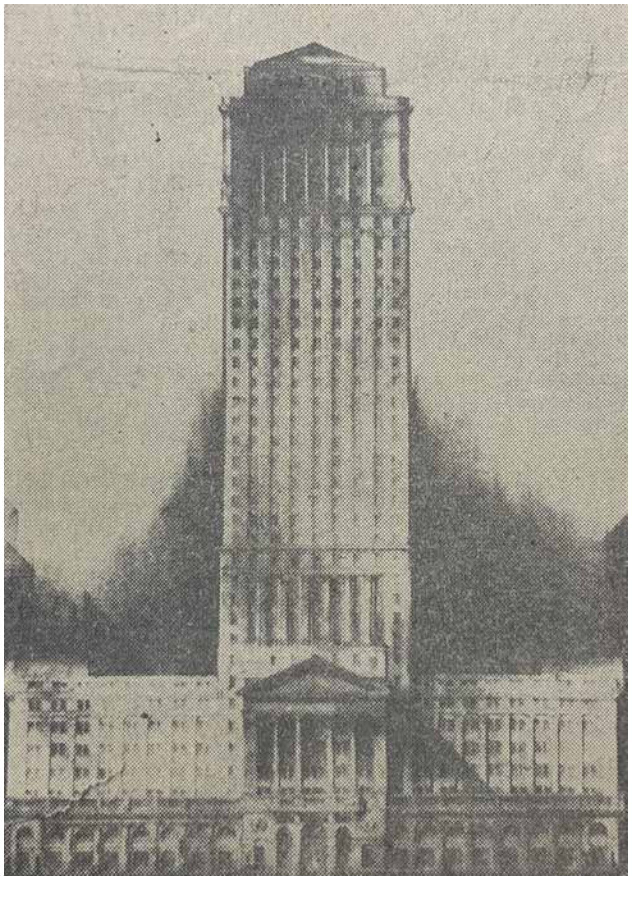

Figure 7 Victor Harold Stromquist, proposed skyscraper addition to the Chicago Federal Building, 1934 (republished in *Chicago American*, 5 May 1958; Library of Congress).

towers—modern commercial shafts plopped atop traditional civic bases—were also aesthetically awkward marriages of those two identities.

In 1949, the Chicago Plan Commission, an agency of the city government, adumbrated an expanded commitment to a skyscraper civic landscape with plans for a huge 41-acre Civic Center on the southwest edge of the Loop straddling the Chicago River. This would concentrate federal, state, county, and city buildings in a 3-million-square-foot complex.[17] Despite a booming manufacturing economy, spurred by the war, regional decentralization and suburbanization had eroded downtown vitality.[18] In response, the 1949 Civic Center plan proposed to replace existing light industrial uses with gleaming new offices intended to galvanize the downtown's office and retail economy. Renderings commissioned by the group (chaired by architect Nathaniel A. Owings of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill) showed an asymmetrical layout of skyscraper slabs centered on a low nine-story courts structure flanked by taller office buildings for the city (thirty-three stories), county (twenty stories), state (thirty-four stories), and federal (twenty stories) governments, all set on a landscaped podium above three thousand parking spaces connected to the regional highway system, unified by a capacious park and riverfront esplanade (Figure 8).

The proposed 1949 Chicago scheme reflected the decade's attention to civic center design, which included a 1943 Mies museum project fronting a pedestrian plaza, published in a special issue of *Architectural Forum* on city planning.[19] Exiled European avant-gardists, led by historian and critic Sigfried Giedion and architect Josep Lluís Sert of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), initiated a discourse on "the need for a New Monumentality" in "newly created civic centers . . . for collective emotional events . . . [with] a unity of architectural background" on "vast open spaces

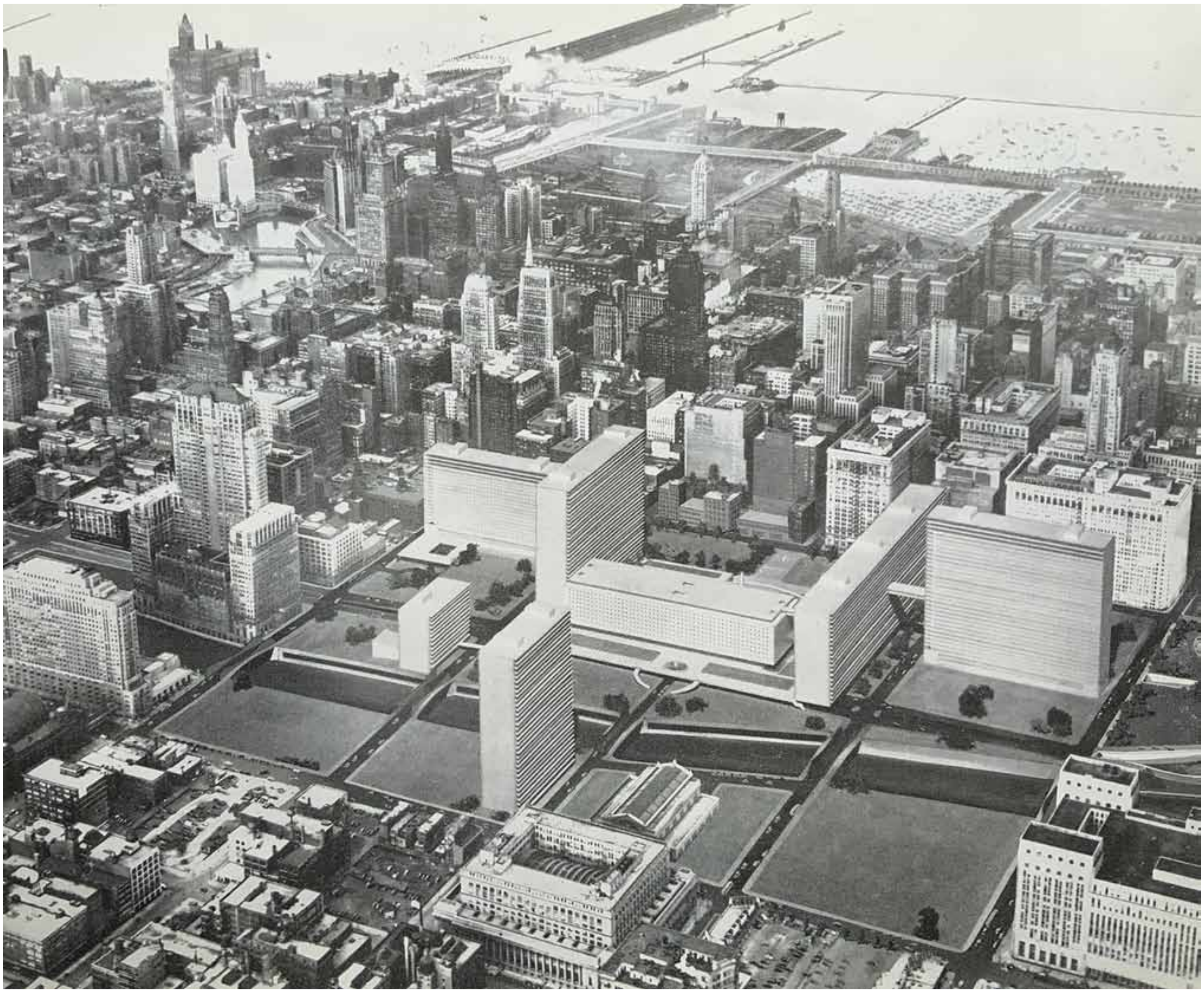

Figure 8 Chicago Plan Commission, proposed Chicago Civic Center, 1949 (Chicago Plan Commission, *Chicago Civic Center* [Chicago: Chicago Plan Commission, 1949], 17; Chicago Public Library).

in the now decaying areas of our cities" and composed of light, modern materials, structures, and "mobile elements."[20] Other participants in the 1940s debate about "New Monumentality," however, promoted "durability . . . solidity . . . large-scale, weight, and . . . presumptive permanence," according to American architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, and not, as American architect George Nelson wrote, "structures where skin stresses take the place of brute weight, where standardized frames make the bones."[21]

In this context, the 1949 Chicago Civic Center plan conformed to emerging visions of modernist forms and pedestrian plazas on urban renewal sites, but plumped for standardized frame-and-skin buildings lacking traditional heft, while introducing its own original, distinctive element to civic center monumentality—namely, the skyscraper, which had not been explicitly imagined in earlier 1940s discourse. A *Chicago Tribune* headline underscored the 1949 scheme's novel high-rise character: "Plan Huge Civic Governmental Office Center—Commission Outlines a Skyscraper Area."[22]

The 1949 Civic Center plan also worked at a scale improbable a decade earlier. Postwar local governments possessed new federal funding along with powers of eminent domain to demolish every building across scores of "blighted," obsolescent blocks, obliterating previous street, block, lot, and building patterns, not to mention uses and people.[23] The federal subsidies aimed to tackle what was seen as a systemic urban crisis and to keep the postwar economy from slipping back into depression. But in Chicago, as urban political historian Joel Rast notes, the postwar demolition of near-downtown manufacturing districts was also a deliberate strategy shared by allied government and center-city business interests, legitimated by their "equation of economic growth and real estate development."[24]

Disruptive and novel in its superblock scale, the proposed 1949 Civic Center was presented by the Plan Commission as continuous with local precedents, "working in the bold tradition of skyscraper design that this city pioneered."[25] "The idea of a Civic Center is not new," the commission noted. "Burnham's plan called for a Civic Center in which the activities of government might be provided for in an imposing setting."[26] Still, these Chicago traditions were being modernized. The superblock siting engendered skyscrapers that appeared more generously civic and less commercial than their predecessors. "The green space provides a welcome contrast to the crowded city blocks," declared the Plan Commission. "Perhaps the most appealing element of the plan is the airiness."[27] In the end, the 1949 Civic Center proposal came to naught, foundering on both local resistance to converting manufacturing land use to real estate development and the inability of the administration of Chicago Mayor Martin Kennelly to corral stakeholders behind the vision.[28] Still, the conception of landscaped skyscraper civic centers gained traction.

From 1949 to 1958, Chicago-area businessmen promoted a second vast, mixed-use urban renewal scheme, again just outside the Loop, north of the Chicago River: the so-called Fort Dearborn project. It would be anchored by a complex of high-rise government buildings, plazas, and parks in a superblock design, again by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. It was, however, consistently thwarted by other downtown legal, real estate, and business interests invested in the Loop's status quo. They organized themselves into the Committee for Government Buildings Downtown and hired planner Tibor J. Haring in 1957 to draft yet a third counterscheme. Haring's plan scattered new government offices within the Loop, adjacent to existing government buildings and conforming to existing street and block patterns. It also favored the modern architectural forms of coordinated, gridded civic skyscrapers, envisioning an ensemble of U.S. government office tower slabs grouped around a park in the "deteriorated area" south of the Cobb federal building (Figure 9).[29]

These late 1950s second and third skyscraper government complex schemes also came to naught. After a decade of thwarted visions, recently elected Mayor Richard J. Daley commissioned in 1957 an official "Development Plan for the Central Area of Chicago" to help it become, as planning historian Larry Bennett writes, "a command and control center for corporate and government institutions."[30] Elected to office in 1955, Mayor Daley moved aggressively to create a "growth coalition" of downtown business leaders, real estate developers, cultural institutions, politicians, and professional planners committed to downtown revitalization and relocation of near-downtown industrial land uses and working-class residents.[31] Big building engendered jobs, corporate profit, city property tax revenue, favorable publicity, and, ultimately, votes across the city. Nicknamed Dick the Builder, the new mayor was lauded nationally as a can-do reformer after the ineffectual Kennelly, running the "city that works."[32] Daley led visits to Detroit's and Pittsburgh's recent urban renewal developments, took control of Chicago's with a new Department of City Planning, and prioritized "getting Skyscrapers in the Loop."[33]

Published in August 1958, the *Development Plan for the Central Area of Chicago* envisioned $1.5 billion in public and private investment in the central business district, including the replacement of near-downtown manufacturing uses with a branch campus of the University of Illinois, consolidation of rail terminals, and construction of fifty thousand new residential units. The 1958 plan also split federal government buildings into two separate civic centers. One, a northerly concentration along Wacker Drive of various government facilities, would include four new twenty-story towers.[34] A second civic center would replace the Cobb federal building and add five new high towers on several cleared blocks of land to the south, toward Congress Street, creating a dramatic point of automobile entry from the nascent regional highway system.[35]

Part of the social and economic reengineering of central Chicago, these proposed civic complexes incorporated substantial open space, including in front of the new courthouse a "formal Federal Plaza suitably landscaped, with a dramatic fountain," as well as a two-block-long landscaped plaza connecting the new courts with the proposed new U.S. office buildings along Congress Street.[36] The plazas for middle-class leisure and shopping "would lend an atmosphere of dignity and order to the Civic Center," further conditioning particular groups of Chicago citizens' identities and relations to the state (Figure 10).[37] These schemes' open spaces, architectural framing, and social politics conformed to the evolving discourse on the civic center, crystallized in a 1952 CIAM international conference in England and the subsequent publication of *The Heart of the City*, which envisioned the civic center as a modernistic updating of the Greek agora—an enlivened, democratic "place of public gatherings."[38]

In the Chicago context, the four separate government complex schemes from 1949 through 1958 represented a consensus among politicians, business interests, and architects that new government buildings strategically conceived around urban renewal strategies would serve corporate, retail, real estate, and city revenue priorities in the Loop, a district buffeted by suburbanization that had seen no new office construction for almost three decades.[39] Chicago Congressman Sidney Yates, a key sponsor of the congressional legislation for the new federal buildings, insisted on language in the bill directing the General Services

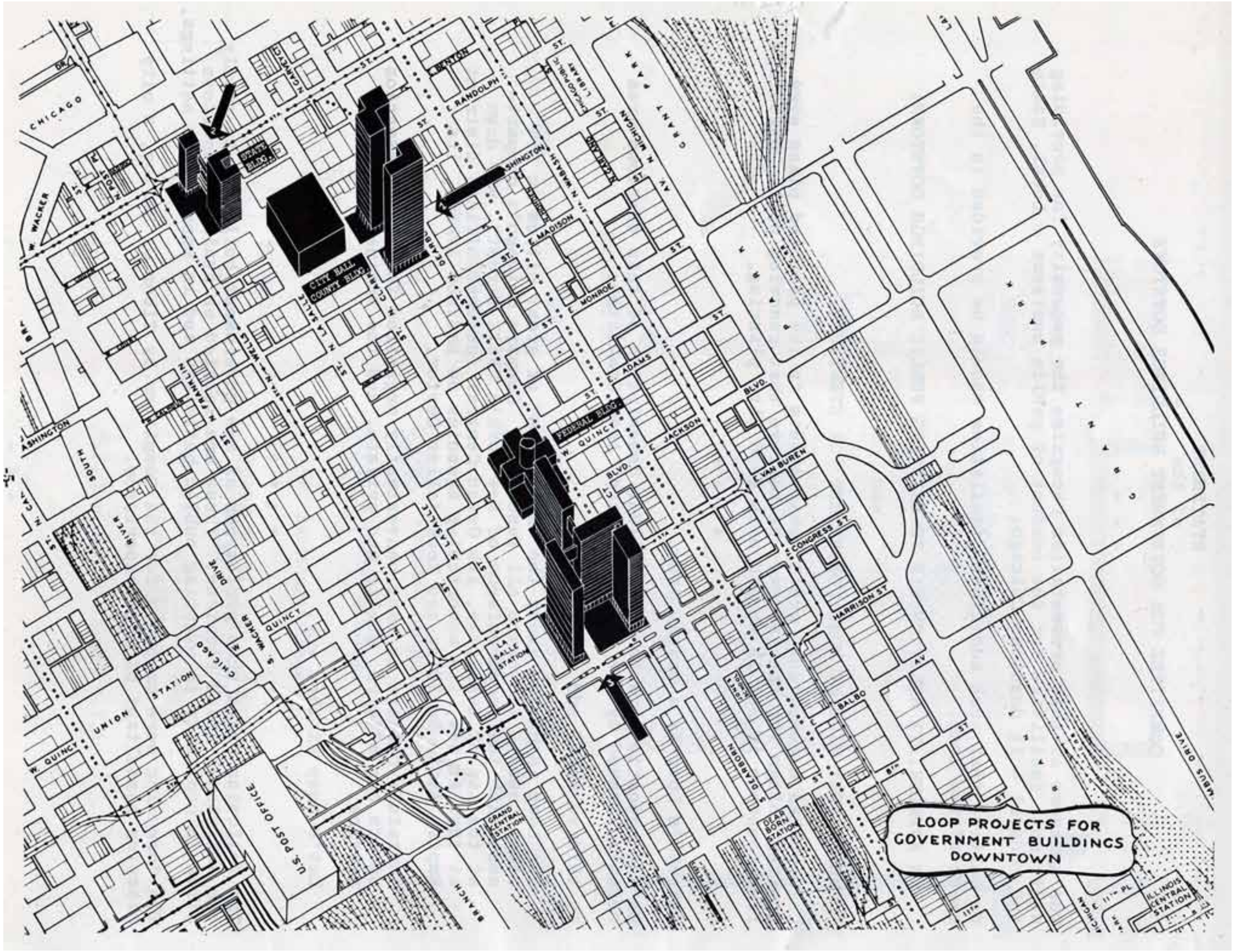
LOOP PROJECTS FOR GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS DOWNTOWN
STATE BLDG
CITY HALL COUNTY BLDG
FEDERAL BLDG
U.S. POST OFFICE
UNION STATION
LA SALLE STATION
GRAND CENTRAL STATION
DEARBORN STATION
ILLINOIS CENTRAL STATION
GRANT PARK
CHICAGO
W. WACKER
RANDOLPH
WASHINGTON
MADISON
MONROE
ADAMS
JACKSON BLVD
VAN BUREN
CONGRESS ST
HARRISON ST
BALBO
QUINCY
N. MICHIGAN AV
S. WACKER DRIVE
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Figure 9 Tibor J. Haring and the Committee for Government Buildings Downtown, proposed dispersed expansion plan for local, state, and federal office buildings in the Chicago Loop, 1957 (courtesy of Dirksen Congressional Center).

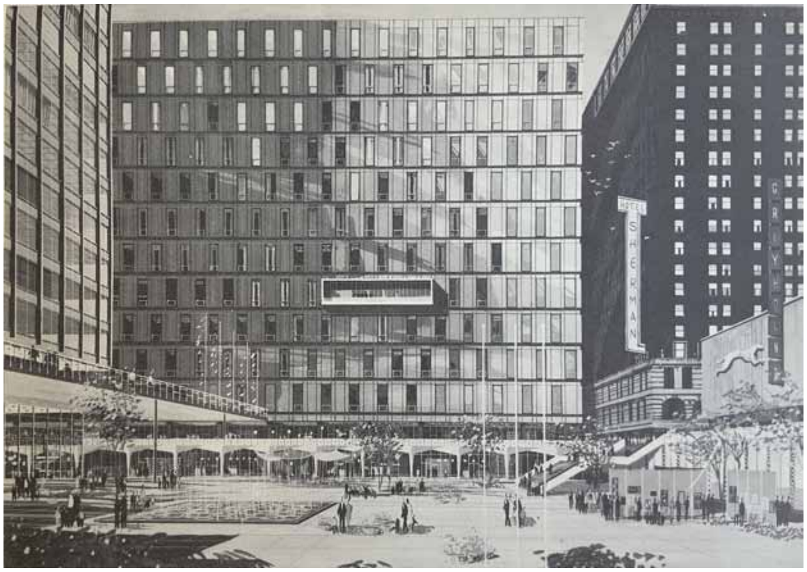

HOTEL SHERMAN

Figure 10 Department of City Planning, Chicago, proposed Chicago Government Center–Civic Plaza, 1958; at center rear is a proposed modern remodeling of the city hall, and at left is a proposed Cook County Civil Courts Building (rendering by H. D. Newman; Department of City Planning, Chicago, *Development Plan for the Central Area of Chicago* [Chicago: Department of City Planning, 1958], 15; Chicago Public Library).

Administration to "comply, as nearly as may be practicable, with the requirements of any [local] redevelopment plan."[40] As George Bailey, president of the Building Managers Association of Chicago, wrote in 1958, "We agree that there should be liberal open spaces surrounding the new public buildings both local and Federal."[41] With sleek modern lines and broad, open plazas, public buildings could convey optimism concerning the future of downtown. The architectural and urban visions that had emerged across these different schemes—relating to civic skyscrapers, open plazas, removal of existing buildings and land uses, the opening of downtown, and the involvement of the U.S. government in local urban renewal—guided eventual key design decisions made by Mies and his associates.

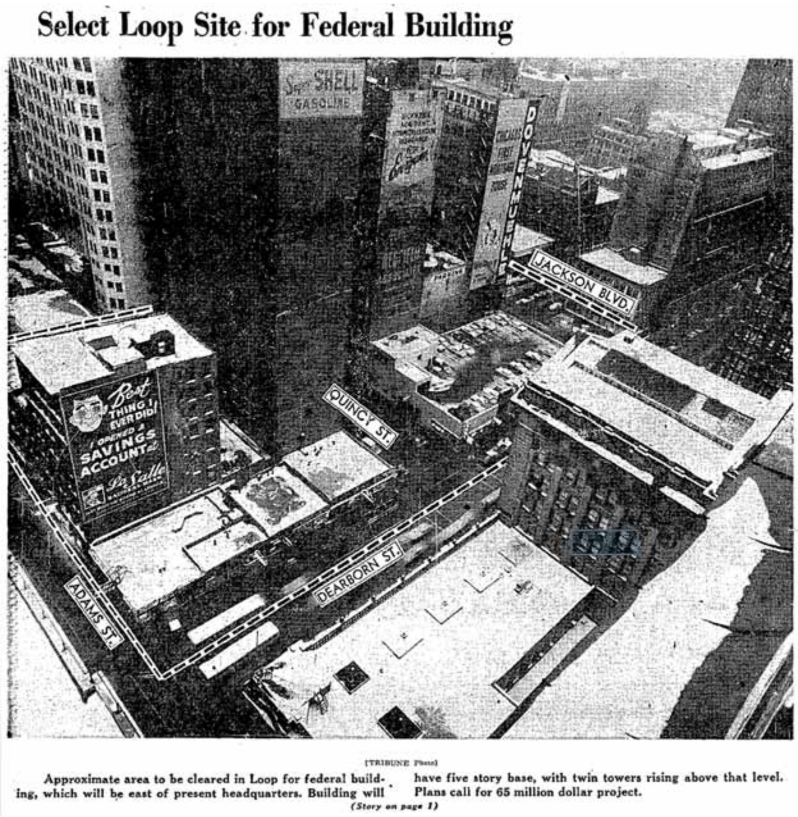
Siting Politics and Business

Envisioning a broad impact from the federal building program, local voices favored multiple sites for new U.S. government buildings in Chicago. Mayor Daley supported the call for two new federal centers in the 1958 development plan. Similarly, U.S. Senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois, at a December 1958 meeting in Chicago, joked with GSA administrator Floete, "We got you out here to prevail upon you for a Christmas present for Chicago in the form of a selection of *sites* for the new government buildings." Floete responded that he would do his best to "deliver that Christmas present" but expressed concern over the lack of "unanimity" among Chicago leaders, which made it difficult for the GSA to "follow the wishes of the local community."[42] Indeed, some business interests favored federal construction only near the existing Cobb building. The Building Managers Association of Chicago argued that relocating the federal courts elsewhere in the city would "seriously inconvenience the local Bar . . . and many other interests," and instead proposed demolishing the Cobb building and erecting a new federal building on that site, which would then be linked by a landscaped promenade to additional, separate, new federal office buildings two blocks southward, to help gentrify the industrial area south of Congress Street.[43] Another business group advising federal officials, the Central Area Committee, concurred that federal construction along Congress Street would "spark private redevelopment" in the South Loop.[44]

Meanwhile, Charles B. Genther, a principal architect with PACE Associates, the architectural firm retained by the Building Managers Association to study the federal building site question, offered yet another idea to the GSA, in a 1958 letter to administrator Floete. Genther suggested that to "realize economies in management and operation," the GSA should purchase and demolish buildings only just east of the Cobb federal building across Dearborn Street, construct a new courts and office structure there, and then clear the Cobb federal building block for a second new federal office building.[45] GSA staff agreed.[46] On 8 January 1959, Floete announced the Chicago Federal Center would indeed be constructed only on the existing Cobb federal building site and the half block to the east. The conjoined, condensed, economical siting trimmed the sails of political and business leaders hoping to use the U.S. government project to leverage broader urban renewal ambitions.[47]

Still, taking even just the half-block site on the east side of Dearborn Street for the new courthouse-office building contributed to the area's desired gentrification. Recent history showed that it was ripe for redevelopment (Figures 11 and 12). In 1940, a trio of ca. 1890s office and hotel skyscrapers had been demolished by owners unwilling to invest money to stabilize the buildings' foundations in connection with a subway construction project; instead, as the area declined economically, they replaced skyscrapers with modest single-story taxpayer structures for a cigar store, restaurants, an army surplus store, a shoe store, a shoeshine parlor, a liquor store, and a bowling alley.[48] The block's humble social profile was also reflected in the surviving seventeen-story Majestic Hotel, designed by Daniel H. Burnham in the 1890s and then converted to working-class residential use for clerks, bricklayers, salespeople, cooks, bartenders, nurses, machinists, and the like.[49] The block's demolition perhaps felt inevitable in the face of overwhelming structural forces, but the scores of working-class residents and small business owners could hardly have welcomed displacement.

On the other hand, just west across Dearborn Street, some federal judges did have something to say about their workplace's imminent destruction. In January 1959, Judge Walter J. La Buy pleaded with Floete to preserve the Cobb federal building where he had served as a federal district court judge for nearly fifteen years, and not to conjoin state justice and businesslike administration architecturally. "There is a psychological reason why the courts should be located in a separate building. Litigants and witnesses entering the present courthouse . . . are impressed with the dignity of the building and are conscious of the fact that they are entering a courthouse, where justice is dispensed. The present courthouse, built along dignified classic lines, is an architectural gem, and is one of Chicago's outstanding landmarks," Judge La Buy argued. "It is truly a temple of justice, one which could never be incorporated into a modern office building."[50] Judge La Buy's colleague, Judge Michael L. Igoe, agreed, telling the *Chicago Tribune* that "the present federal courtrooms are the most beautiful in the country" and it made no sense to abandon them (Figure 13).[51] Chicago's preservation community was split on whether the Cobb federal building counted as significant



Select Loop Site for Federal Building

JACKSON BLVD.
QUINCY ST.
DEARBORN ST.
ADAMS ST.

[TRIBUNE Photo]

Approximate area to be cleared in Loop for federal building, which will be east of present headquarters. Building will have five story base, with twin towers rising above that level. Plans call for 65 million dollar project.

(Story on page 1)

Figure 11 Site condemned for the Chicago Federal Center, 1959, aerial view looking southeast; at right is the east wing of the Cobb Chicago Federal Building, and across Dearborn Street are the one-story taxpayer blocks constructed in the early 1940s (*Chicago Tribune*, 7 Jan. 1959; Chicago Tribune/TCA).

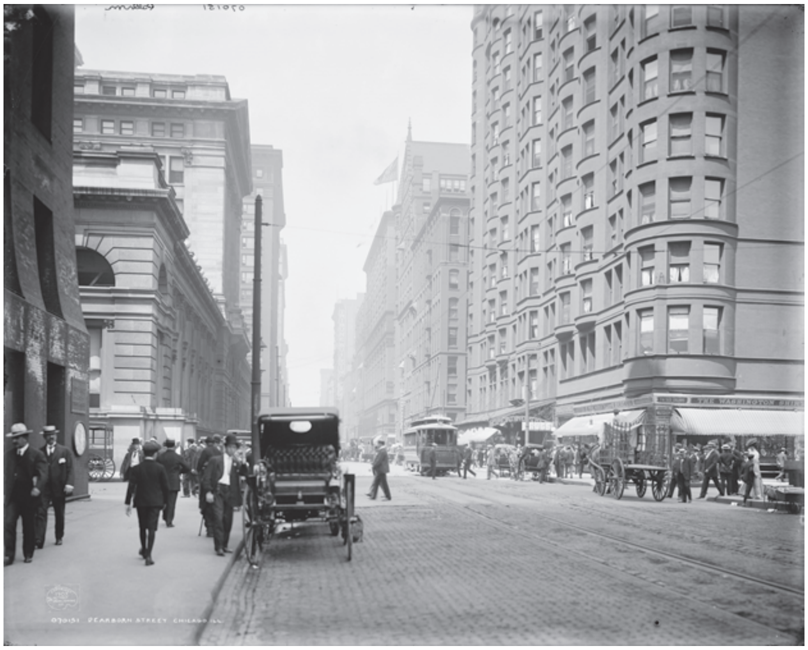


Figure 12 Dearborn Street, looking northwest from Jackson Boulevard, Chicago, 1907 (same block shown in Figure 11); in the middle ground on the left is the Cobb Chicago Federal Building, and on the right are the skyscrapers removed from the block in the 1940s and replaced by one-story taxpayer blocks, the site selected for the Dirksen Courthouse building in 1959. Those buildings include Burnham & Root's Great Northern Hotel, 1890–92, in the foreground at right; the 1887 Temple Court Building, middle ground at right; and Henry Ives Cobb's Owings Building, 1890, with the pitched gable adjacent to the flag (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress).

in the city's architectural history. Some felt the traditionally ornamented building merited preservation not as "distinguished architecture" but rather as an "expression of the style of the time."[52] Others, committed to saving buildings designed by Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright and other pioneers of Chicago modern architecture, felt strongly that the federal building "lacked sufficient merit or interest to deserve a fuss."[53] In the end, Floete rejected the calls for preservation, insisting that even with a "large expenditure it would not be possible to cure all of the obsolescence"; he did attempt to reassure Judge La Buy that the architects would arrive at a design to "reflect the dignity of

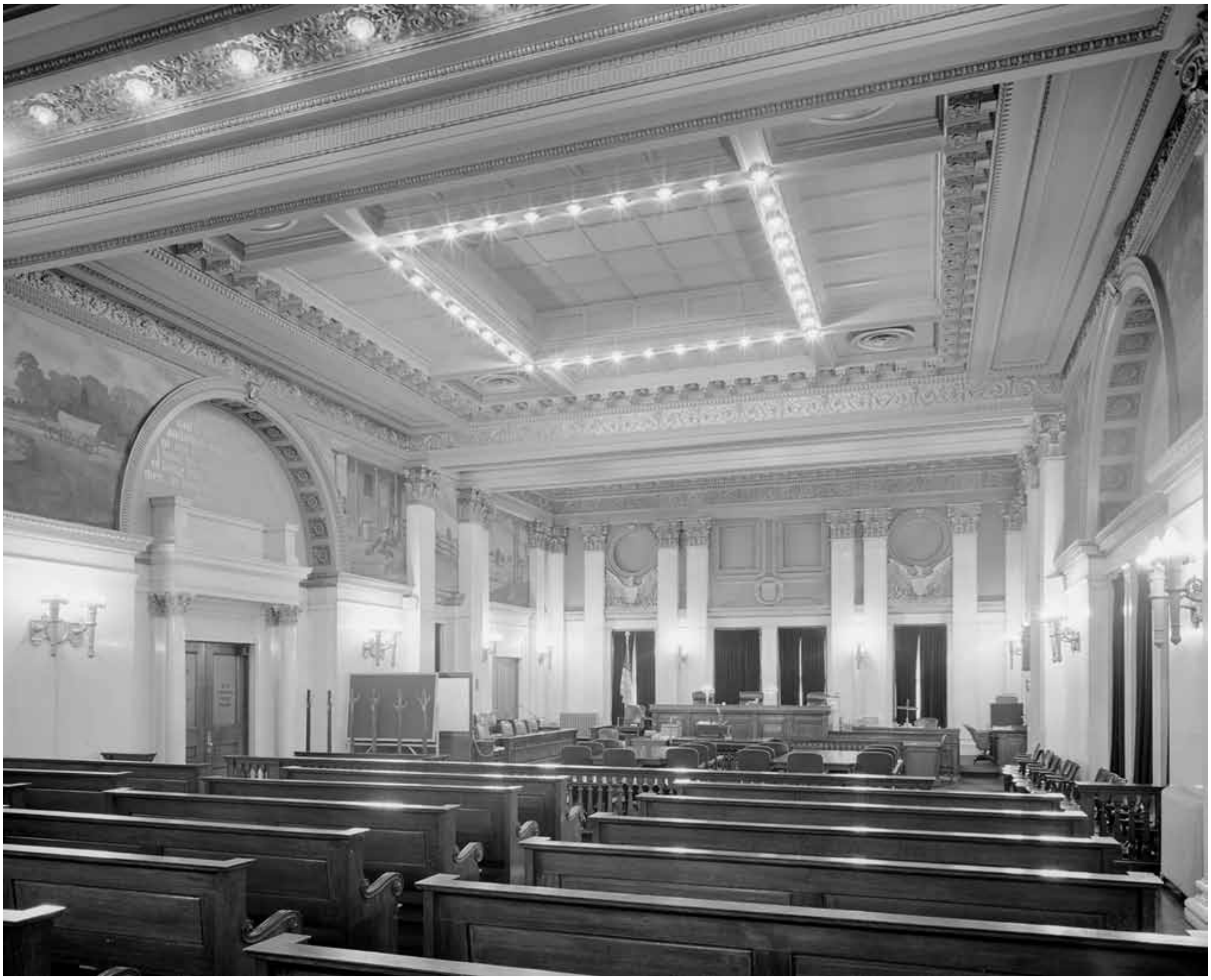


Figure 13 Henry Ives Cobb, Chicago Federal Building, 1896–1905, interior of a courtroom (photo by Harold Allen, 1964; Historic American Building Survey, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress).

the courts in a modern building which will be an asset to the community."[54] The fostering of civic ideals would guide key aspects of the architecture and site design.

Mies, Modularity, and Efficiency

After selecting the site, the GSA sent a questionnaire to all registered area architects, soliciting interest in the project. In May 1959, the agency announced a joint venture of the Mies office and three other firms: Naess & Murphy; Schmidt, Garden & Erickson; and A. Epstein and Sons.[55] Gene Summers, the lead associate for the project in the Mies firm, later recalled that all the associated architects quickly agreed that the Mies organization would design the Federal Center.[56] No records explain why the Mies firm was chosen for the job or for the role of design leader.[57] Mies himself had almost nothing ever to say publicly about the Chicago Federal Center, noting in a 1964 interview, "We put the buildings so that each gets the best situation and that the space between them is about the best we can achieve," without specifying what "best" meant.[58]

The Mies firm was certainly the most famous in the eligible regional pool. By 1959, it had completed to great acclaim several skyscraper-and-plaza combinations, already anticipated since 1949 for Chicago civic centers. These included the local 860–880 Lake Shore Drive apartment buildings (1951) and a more programmatically relevant office building for the Seagram company in New York (1958).[59] Federal building officials were aware of Mies. In 1957, a commissioner of the GSA's Public Building Service personally invited him to an exhibition titled *One Hundred Years of Federal Architecture*, held at the Washington, D.C., headquarters of the American Institute of Architects. The exhibition "also looks to the future with its emphasis on the functional in design," the commissioner explained, perhaps already envisioning employing the famous

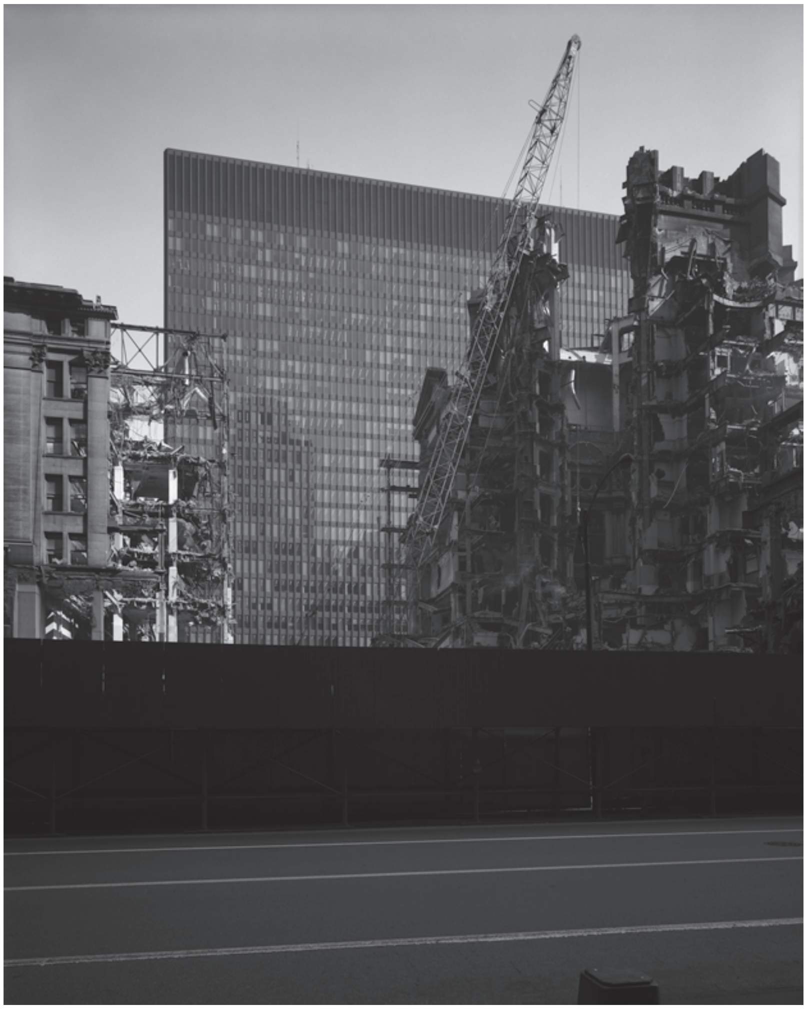


Figure 14 Henry Ives Cobb, Chicago Federal Building, 1896–1905, seen during demolition, 1965; in the background is Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Dirksen Courthouse in the Chicago Federal Center (HB-27043-M2, Hedrich-Blessing Collection, Chicago History Museum; © Chicago Historical Society, published on or before 2016, all rights reserved).

modernist architect.[60] Additionally, the Chicago planning official with whom the GSA consulted in settling on a site for the Federal Center admired Mies. In 1955, Planning Commissioner Ira J. Bach, after visiting the Mies-designed Crown Hall at Illinois Institute of Technology, sent Mies an appreciative note: "I was deeply impressed by the vitality and freshness of the building. . . . In my opinion, this magnificent structure will become internationally accepted for its great strength and beauty."[61] This was precisely the image of progressive, disciplined design that Chicago officials hoped could help revitalize downtown and the city; the city council would later praise the Federal Center for its "flawless purity and uncompromising clarity."[62] Mid-1960s photographs of the Cobb federal building's demolition juxtaposed the new building seemingly rising out of the rubble of an apparently superseded past, an aesthetic of eclipse also captured in a *Chicago Tribune* headline about the Federal Center design: "Glass Court Will Replace Granite One" (Figure 14).[63]

Mies's specific handling of uniform structural bays, planning squares, and curtain wall façades imaged as well a particular interest at this time in modularity as the architectural embodiment of "production efficiency," as a writer for *Progressive Architecture* described it in 1957.[64] The "visual expression of a controlling grid" offered "disciplined, unified neutrality"; it was "a tool for achieving order."[65] At the Chicago Federal Center, a standard 4-foot, 8-inch module defined all site and interior planning dimensions, plus window widths, plaza pavers, and the post office roof grid.

In context, we can see why Mies would have been chosen for the Chicago Federal Center commission, aesthetically and ideologically. His rigorous, puristic modular technique would have seemed like the ideal expression of the U.S. administrative state in its businesslike aspirations and mien—organizationally disciplined, economically productive, impersonally technical, and ideologically neutral in its management of American society, thus implicitly guarded against certain lines of criticism. Mies's realm of professional expertise was above the fray of politics, which was also the image of the early Daley administration and its "ideology of privatism," as urban historian Rast puts it, with public urban renewal decisions presented as "nonpolitical" responses to private market inevitable rationalities.[66] Indeed, the Mies firm avowed that its work on the Chicago Federal Center was vacant of political intention, no different for the firm than designing office complexes for corporate America, “Nabisco or U.S. Steel,” in the words of Mies associate and Federal Center project director Gene Summers. “It was a functional office building they [GSA] were looking for.”[67]

But modular efficiency was not enough for government architecture. American governance should not be market driven, concerned with profit and productivity, many suggested, but instead should serve the ideal public goods of citizen dignity and democracy, which are unmeasurable by quantifiable performance and money. “Efficiency is not a word from the public realm,” wrote political scientist Ralph C. Chandler. “It is a word from economics.”[68] The architecture of the U.S. government would need to accommodate a degree of civicness beyond the rationalistic and efficient-seeming modularity characteristic of the growing administrative state. Government architecture could be more connected to locale and public purposes, both to distinguish it from commercial architecture and to mitigate the impersonal abstractions of businesslike administration.

Site Planning and Locality

Writing about the rationalistic “bureaucratic architecture” of the “efficient workplace,” Henry-Russell Hitchcock suggested, “Where imagination is required in the realm of bureaucratic architecture is in the site-planning.”[69] Indeed, site planning was one of the most studied aspects of the Chicago Federal Center’s design. From August to October 1959, Gene Summers led the design of five alternative, elegant walnut-wood study models for the consideration of the Mies firm as well as the GSA and Senator Dirksen. Mies himself was mainly away in Europe for these months.[70] For Summers, leading design on the Chicago Federal Center site plan, there were several shared givens. An overall tower-and-plaza combination could be assumed both from the decade’s worth of previous Chicago civic center schemes and the Mies firm’s urban design vocabulary. Also, to house the courts and offices to be displaced by the Cobb federal building’s demolition, the project’s first phase would fill the newly purchased half block on Dearborn Steet’s east side with a vast tower slab. This both walled off Dearborn Street and, on the building’s other long face, blocked the westward run of Quincy Street. The new tower slab thus shared with the earlier Cobb U.S. government building two unusual urban characteristics in the Loop. First, it terminated a street vista, as the Cobb federal building also did with Quincy Street, and it controlled a whole block frontage, along Dearborn Street. In contrast with downtown Chicago’s standard commercial blocks—seen obliquely and in clashing contrasts of architectural material, style, detail, and mass—the new main building possessed an unusual degree of order, harmony, frontality, and unified civic design.

The first phase of the urban design thus fixed a long, broad wall along the east side of Dearborn Street, with alternatives schemed for the remaining postal and office functions focused on options for building masses and open spaces on the vacated Cobb federal building block. A favored early scheme called for a single structure of fifty-six stories, combining federal offices and courthouse, on the half block along Dearborn as the first phase; the building would face a broad open plaza with a one-story post office structure on the old federal building site (Figure 15, top left). This impressive open setting for what would have been Chicago’s tallest building harked back to the 1909 Plan of Chicago, where a domed government administration building dominated the adjacent public space and metropolitan skyline. Not surprisingly, this scheme was a personal favorite of Senator Dirksen and the designers. “It would have been fantastic,” recalled Gene Summers.[71] But the massive structure would have consumed more than 15 percent of the U.S. government construction appropriation for the entire country, a bridge too far for Senator Dirksen’s congressional colleagues. Moreover, the GSA was ambivalent about having the federal government assume the highest, most prominent place on the Chicago skyline.[72]

Two other of the five alternatives created decidedly inward-facing complexes. One plan twinned courthouse and office buildings across a pedestrian plaza and one-story post office, the two towers’ backs to the surrounding downtown. Even more hermetic was a scheme of triple identical towers around a plaza and post office, more fully enclosing the center (Figure 15, top right). Both plans harked back to City Beautiful civic center principles of contained, interior order versus an external, chaotic commercial metropolis.

In contrast, the remaining two alternative site plans were organized more openly to the surrounding city. They featured an asymmetrical arrangement of buildings, with planes sliding past each other rather than enclosing corners and walls (Figure 16). In both asymmetrical alternatives, the three governmental functions previously conjoined in the Cobb federal building’s pyramidal unity—post office, courts, and offices all together—were disaggregated into separate masses (Figure 17). The first-phase, eastern courthouse slab along Dearborn Street would be followed by a second-phase office tower, placed on the south side of the vacated block at the corner of Dearborn Street and Jackson Boulevard, plus a single-story post office pavilion at the block’s northwest corner of Clark and Adams Streets; the rest of the vacated site would be left open as paved plazas. In one of these alternatives, the second-phase office building equaled the first-phase courthouse in height (see

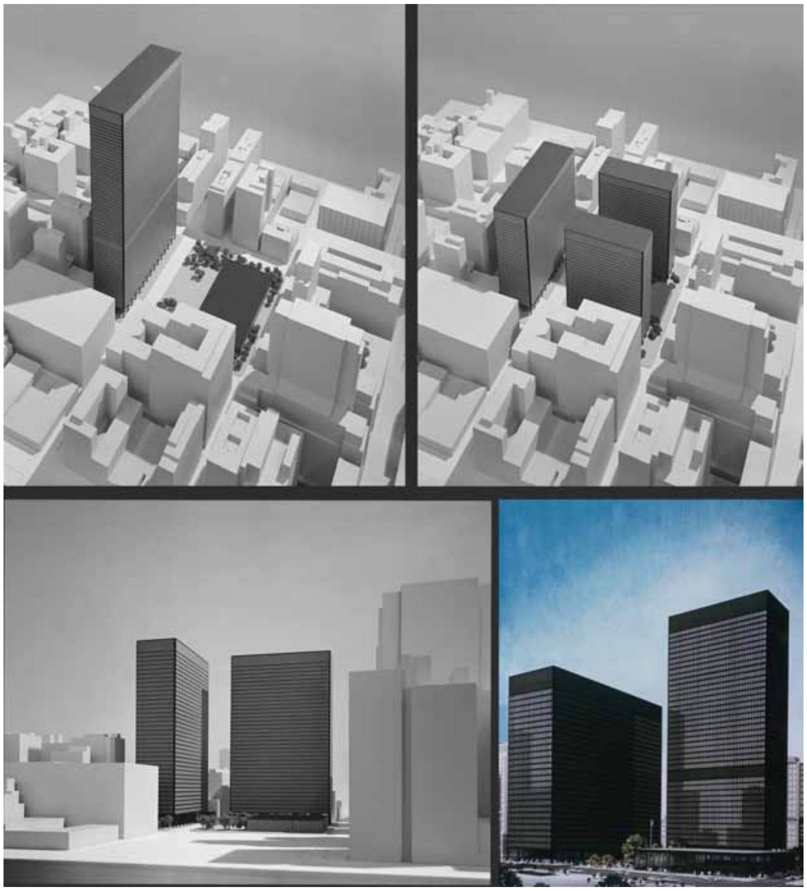


Figure 15 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, schemes for the Chicago Federal Center, 1959: top left, Scheme A, all court and office business in a single building, one-story post office on plaza across Dearborn Street; top right, Scheme E, courthouse at left, two federal office buildings flanking post office at right; bottom left, Scheme B, federal courthouse at left, federal office building at right, post office in foreground; bottom right, adopted scheme (HB-22694-F, HB-22694-J, HB-22694-B, HB-27043-V2, respectively, Hedrich-Blessing Collection, Chicago History Museum; © Chicago Historical Society, published on or before 2016, all rights reserved).

Figure 15, bottom left). Concerned with the project's general proportions, Mies expressed a preference for buildings of equal height as "being a little more quiet," Summers later recalled.[73] In the other alternative, the second-phase federal office building rose much higher than the first-phase courthouse. As Summers explained to Mies, by the time Congress would appropriate money for the second-phase office building, more space would likely be needed, and it would be preferable aesthetically to have a significantly taller, slenderer second tower juxtaposed to the first broad slab, rather than a second tower just a little bit higher (see Figure 15, bottom right). This was the massing and urban design scheme chosen.

As built, the asymmetrical site design reflected Mies's dynamic spatial planning.[74] A sketch plan for the Chicago Federal Center site shows streaming penciled lines flowing between the square post office and rectangular office building, along the block's boundaries, and even inside the post office pavilion and the office building's circular revolving doors, suggesting that what the Mies office was studying was not just abstract spatial flow but also embodied pedestrian movement: in, out, and through space and structure (Figure 18). The site planning and flow also had very specific, local directionalities, as Summers explained, being purposefully more open to the north, so "that you enter this thing [the federal complex] from the center [of the Loop]," via the complex's open, low northern boundary of Adams Street, thus connected to the corporate and retail heart of Chicago.[75]

In the other direction, south of the new complex's site, the broad, high federal office building hid the "ragged edge," in Lambert's words, of the adjacent block.[76] The South Loop's raggedness was not just aesthetic but also economic and social. The streets and blocks immediately south of the old Cobb federal building, and the proposed new Federal Center, were lined with many buildings that provided working-class residents with single-room occupancy accommodations. Ranging from three to seventeen stories, built of brick, and sharing party walls, these residential hotels accommodated mainly single, white, native-born clerks, cooks, waiters, dishwashers, nurses, shoe salesmen, freight handlers, telegraphers, postal clerks, firemen, elevator operators, watchmen, food runners, candymakers, fountain boys, and dancing girls.[77] Generally the residential sections of the buildings started on the second floor, above street-level commercial space occupied by bars, taverns, cheap restaurants, burlesque and movie theaters, pawn shops, liquor stores, and thrift shops. This was the urban landscape that Daley's alliance of center-city corporate interests, urban planners, and city officials had

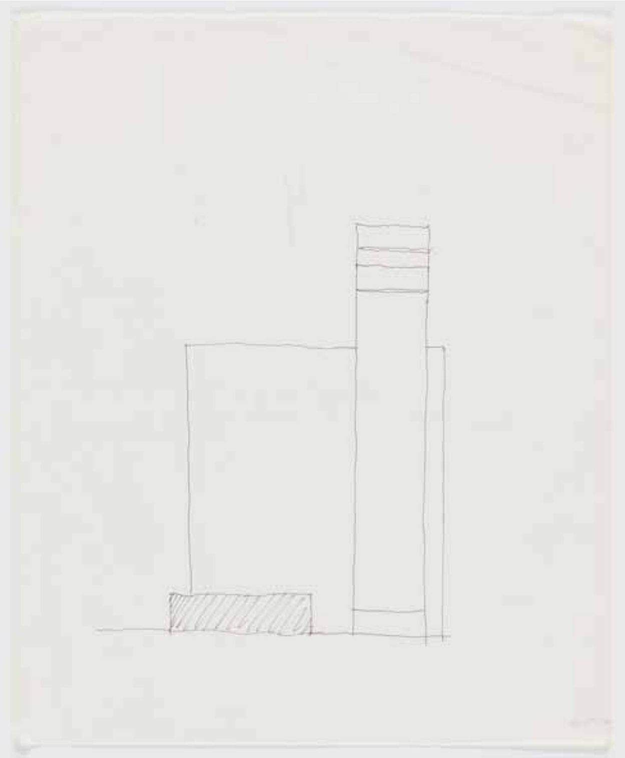


Figure 16 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago Federal Center, sketch study exploring overlapping plans and elevations of buildings, ca. 1959 (digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY; © 2025 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn).

wanted redeveloped with U.S. government towers and pedestrian malls and plazas on the blocks between the old federal building and Congress Street. These parties aimed to replace working-class commerce and residences with a more socially harmonious setting for "housing for middle and upper income families" and the new campus of the University of Illinois planned for just south of Congress Street.[78] While GSA officials recognized this district just south of the Cobb courthouse as "one of the most rundown areas" of downtown Chicago, they were uninterested in redeveloping it themselves.[79] Instead, they chose a site plan that purposefully closed off the new Federal Center from the "flophouse" neighborhood to the south, symbolizing the federal GSA's autonomy from local urban redevelopment ambitions.[80]

Civicness Outside and Inside

Construction of the Chicago Federal Center proceeded over the next fifteen years, slowed by the need to build in stages and the vagaries of congressional financing for an expensive $100 million project. The center was funded along with scores of other U.S. projects by the Public Building Act of 1959, in a shift from a postwar policy of private capital building and leasing back facilities to direct congressional appropriation and control of federal office construction, a move supported by Senator Dirksen for its "efficiency and economy."[81] What would be named the Senator Everett McKinley Dirksen U.S. Courthouse was completed in 1964, a great, dark, monolithic glass-and-steel slab rising 396 feet in thirty habitable floors, each 12 feet high with a double-height ground floor and lobby, and extending along Dearborn Street 364 feet in thirteen structural bays, plus four bays deep, each a 28-foot square divided into 4-foot, 8-inch square modules, which both internally defined the inside rectilinear planning layouts for courtrooms and offices and were articulated externally on the vast gridded façades with six brown-tinted windows per structural bay, each window module framed by vertical, wide-flange, black-painted steel I beam mullions projected in front of recessed, horizontal, black steel-plate spandrels.[82] After federal courts and offices moved into the Dirksen building from the old Cobb federal building, the latter's full-block site was cleared in 1965. The vacated block's northern two-thirds were filled by an open rectangular plaza paved in gray granite along Dearborn and Adams Streets and the low monumental United States Post Office–Loop Station, constructed 1970–73, a perfect, 197-foot square that mimicked the Dirksen Courthouse's structural, planning, and fenestration modules, with the post office's great single-story volume also equal in double height to the high lobby of the Dirksen building that it faced across the open, flat plaza and Dearborn Street. Enclosing the plaza and the block's southeastern corner, at the intersection of Dearborn Street and Jackson Boulevard, rose the John C. Kluczynski Federal Building, finished in 1974 and named after a recently deceased local congressman. This more compact, vertical version of the Dirksen building, also four structural bays deep but just eight in length, and rising a dozen further floors to forty-two stories and 562 feet, was a high punctation mark in the trio of dark glass-and-steel structures sliding past each other at right angles around the gridded open plaza.

Besides the site planning's localized directionality, close examination of the Federal Center's architectural elevations, structure, and massing reveals other civic, contextual links. The new buildings, despite stark contrasts of style and material, connect visually to nearby older edifices. The post office's glass edges clearly align with existing masonry masses across adjacent Clark and Adams Streets (Figure 19). The office building's metallic piers continue the rhythm of a nearby Ionic stone colonnade (Figure 20). And the open plaza is pleasingly contained northward by two large, conjoined buildings across Adams Street.

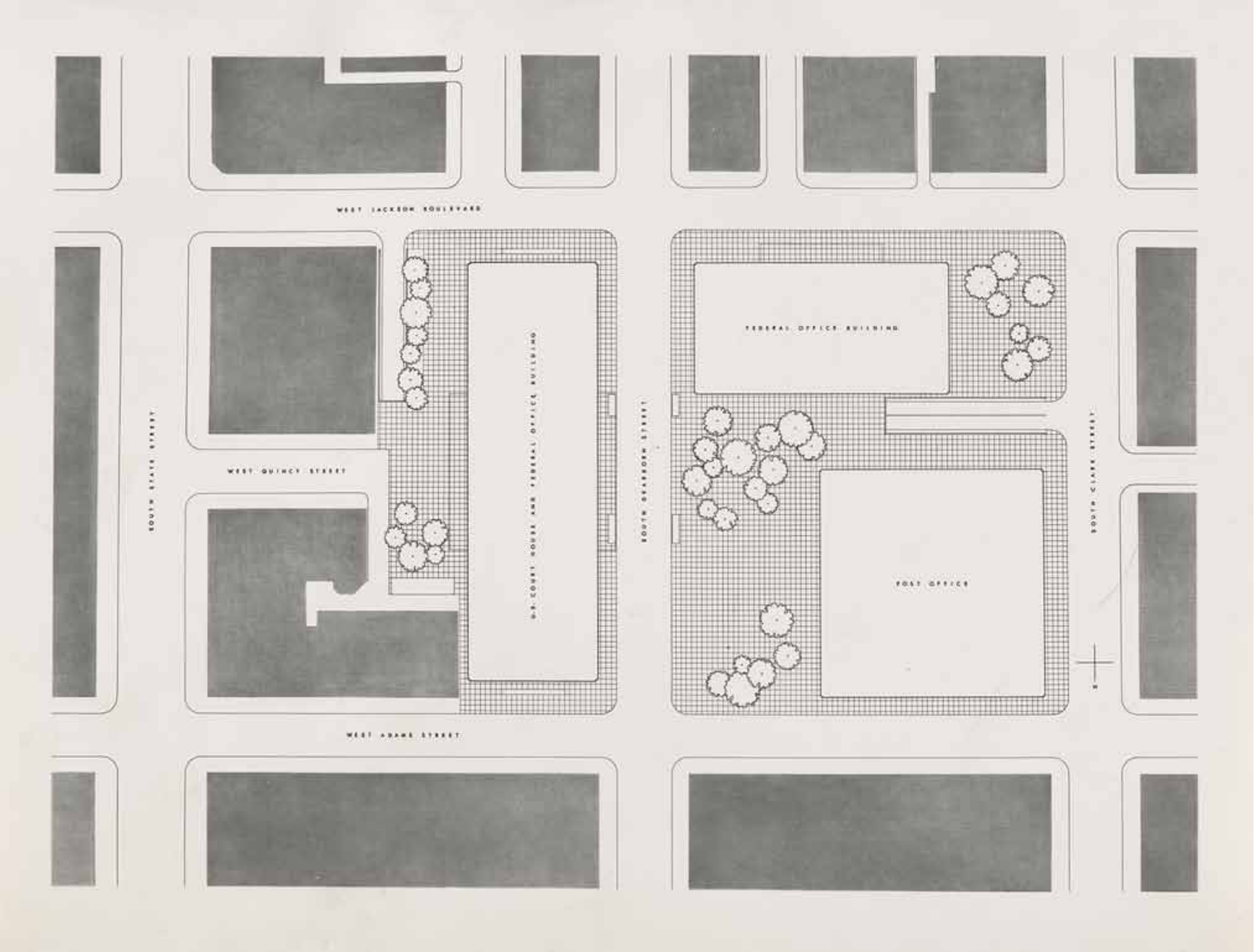


Figure 17 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago Federal Center, site plan, ca. 1960 (digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY; © 2025 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn).

Functionally, a couple of programmatic elements also gave the governmental center a civic cast, distinguishing it from similar-looking private office building skyscraper-and-plaza ensembles. Preliminary plans detailed a four-thousand-person fallout shelter in the courthouse basement, for use in case of nuclear war.[83] More prosaically, some dozen new federal courtrooms, double height (following the precedent of the multiple-story courtroom sections of the earlier Cobb federal building), were tentatively expressed as distinctive civic spaces on the new structure's main, Dearborn Street façade by the removal of intermediate spandrels for some dozen stories up through the center of the elevation, which would have distinguished the U.S. government building's façade from the uniform modular grids of private, commercial office buildings (Figure 21).[84] But the idea was dropped because edge locations for the courtrooms proved difficult for interior planning, and the external articulation would have been largely invisible to people on the ground.[85] Civic expression would be achieved in other ways.

Inside, the built courtrooms achieved a synthesis of civicness and efficiency unrealized on the façade, embodying GSA administrator Floete's vision for the "dignity of the courts in a modern building" (Figure 22).[86] Windowless boxes on the upper floors, the twelve original courtrooms featured elegant walnut furnishings and floor-to-ceiling paneling, with doors flush to the walls; the hermeticism of these stately double-height enclosures was reinforced by aluminum-grille ceilings with recessed lighting that cast a glow of modular uniformity like that suffusing the total complex's image of efficiency (Figure 23). In 1965 *Progressive Architecture* noted, "The rooms manage to preserve an aura of dignity and respect, even in the face of that often-lively American courtroom behavior."[87]

In the circulation spaces outside the courtrooms, the public was carefully segregated from court officials, who had their own network of private corridors, elevators, and offices along the building's eastern side. The public was specially accommodated by elevator lobbies stretched to the western exterior window wall, providing dramatic views of

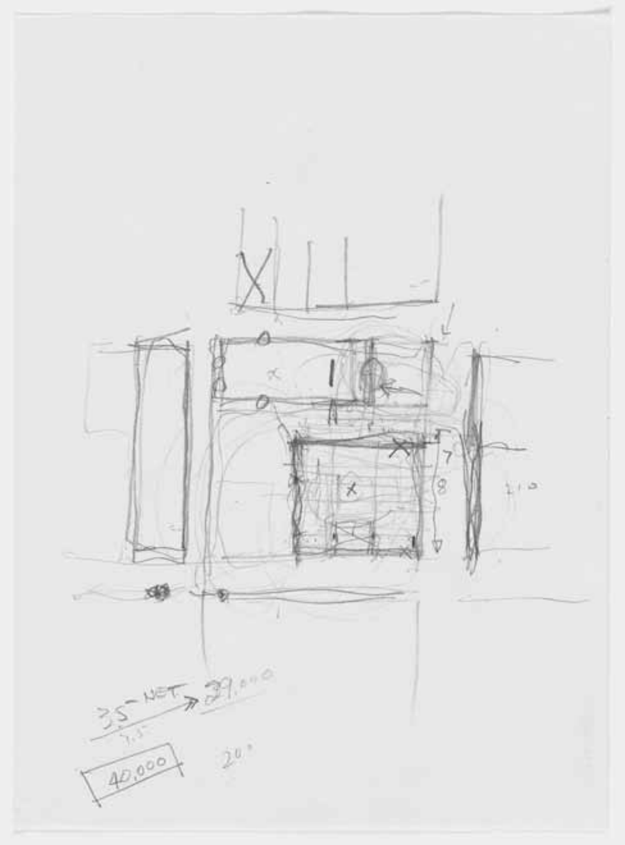


Figure 18 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago Federal Center, study of pedestrian circulation, ca. 1959 (digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY; © 2025 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn).

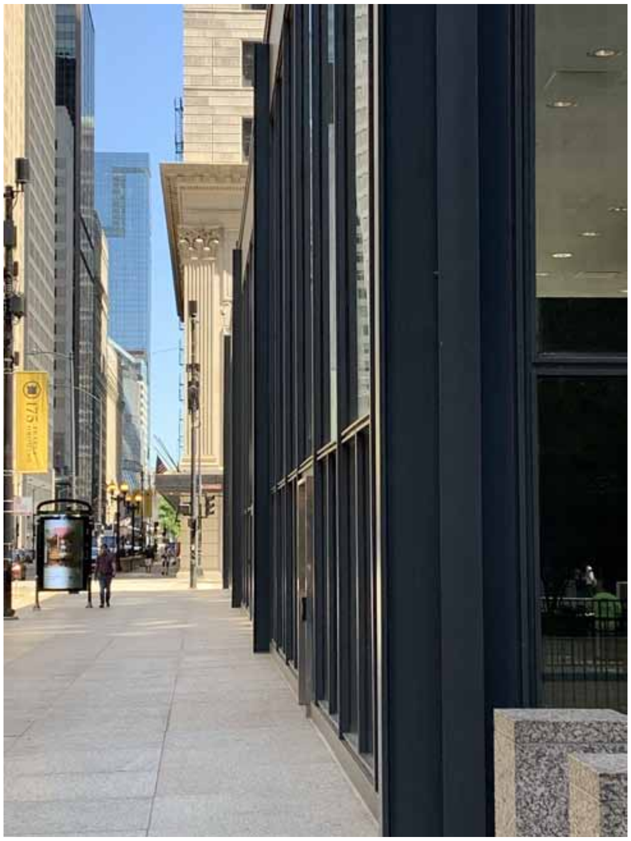


Figure 19 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago Federal Center, 1959–74, U.S. Post Office at right, with colonnade aligned with the classical pilaster of D. H. Burnham & Company's Edison Building, 1910 (photo by Daniel Bluestone).

the city. Openness to the outside distinguished this government building's layout from standard commercial buildings, where window space is at an economic premium and reserved for office tenants. The windowed elevator lobbies' subtle civic gesture enabled visitors to look down on the rest of the city and complex—notably, the plaza and post office, whose elegant rooftop grid echoed the courtrooms' enclosures, a purposeful adornment to make the complex appear more than merely businesslike and efficient.

Beneath its roof, the post office contained further civic aspects, including floor-to-ceiling windows offering broad surrounding views. Beneath visitors' feet, similar granite pavers surfaced both exterior plaza and interior floors, and the sweep of the main lobby facing the plaza offered an experience of public scale comparable to the grandest Beaux-Arts hall. The post office's façade was also subtly monumental. Its breadth of twenty-one window bays was artfully subdivided into three by thickened piers defining the structural grid every seven window bays, a trio of large parts in the classical manner that provided a refined civic embellishment distinct from the uninterrupted, uniform, modularity of the Mies office's banking pavilion at the Toronto-Dominion Center, a comparable complex.

One of the Chicago Federal Center's most distinctive civic features was embodied by the grand sense of arrival in the ground-floor lobby of the Dirksen Courthouse, intensively studied in more than a dozen variations by the Mies firm.[88] One alternative floor arrangement was rejected tellingly because, as a margin inscription explains, an elevator core in the plan's middle would mean "no center entrance for public possible."[89] In the end, the Mies firm carved out a capacious lobby three full structural bays wide, stretched an additional half bay in each direction to severe flanking walls ornamented with the U.S. Great Seal: a vast, spare, open space—116 feet wide, 110 feet deep, and 25 feet high—framed in granite and glass, monumentalized by floor-to-ceiling black steel columns (Figure 24). Commentators recognized the Dirksen lobby as a distinctive "great hall," "a public space in scale," and "certainly a giant step beyond the tiled, dairy-like facilities of many previous Government buildings."[90] The Dirksen lobby is unique in the Mies firm's oeuvre for tower ground floors, which otherwise feature small, peripheral lobbies with central elevator

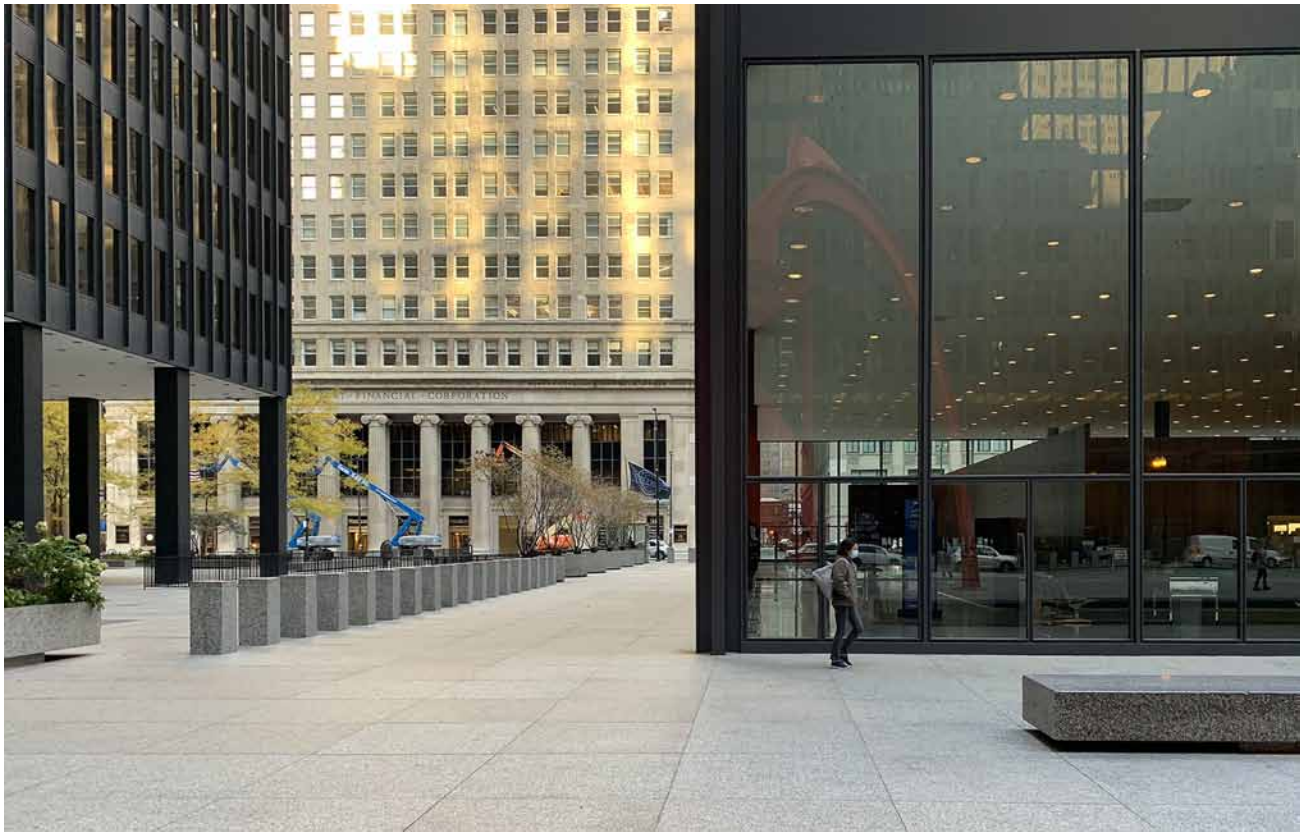


Figure 20 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago Federal Center, 1959–74, colonnade of John C. Kluczynski Federal Building at left, aligned with and echoing the colossal order of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White's Illinois Merchant's Bank Building, 1924 (photo by Daniel Bluestone).

banks in the more economical position for commercial, upper-floor office layouts.[91] The Dirksen lobby's distinctive civicness extended spatially, too, as a permeable "gateway," *Architectural Record* called it, a "straight visual shot" up eastern Quincy Street through the Dirksen's back plaza, entrance, and great hall, westward across Dearborn Street to the plaza and complex's other buildings, then out the western boundary of Clark Street to the Loop beyond.[92] This permeability and the clear integration of exterior public plazas and open interior lobbies, along with other details, such as harmonious granite paving both inside and out, at-grade entrances, and transparent glass ground floors, underscored the Federal Center's civic nature.

The central plaza, above all, staged the governmental, civic character of the complex. On the 4.6-acre site, the post office and Kluczynski Federal Building occupied only 46 percent of the main block's surface, a much smaller proportion than would be used at private commercial sites, which would seek to maximize the land's profitability. The buildings were also continuous with city life at ground level, contrasting with the Seagram Building's slight elevation above the sidewalk. This exterior spaciousness is the opposite of the Cobb federal building formula, where the interior domed atrium bestowed dignity and grandeur, subsequently deemed an uneconomical waste of space (see Figure 3). Conversely, the new Federal Center relocated its unprogrammed spaces from the buildings' interiors, largely following commercial skyscraper logic, to the complex's exterior, where they were less subject to the GSA's building calculus, and where they now bore symbolic weight. Open permeability legitimated the U.S. administrative state as spatially generous ("inefficient") and thus democratic.

Status and Citizenship

Thus far, we have placed the architecture of the Chicago Federal Center in the historical contexts of city-center tower-and-plaza urban renewal proposals in postwar Chicago and in relation to the dual businesslike and civic characters of the U.S. administrative state. The center's architecture also related to the identities of people who worked and visited there. For judges and other high officials, the hermetic elegance of the courtrooms conjoined with the civic scale of the complex's open spaces, and the courthouse lobby could satisfy the judiciary's specific, stated need for visitors to be "impressed with the dignity of the building," as Judge La Buy had emphasized in 1959. For the complex's other, lower-level employees, the streamlined,

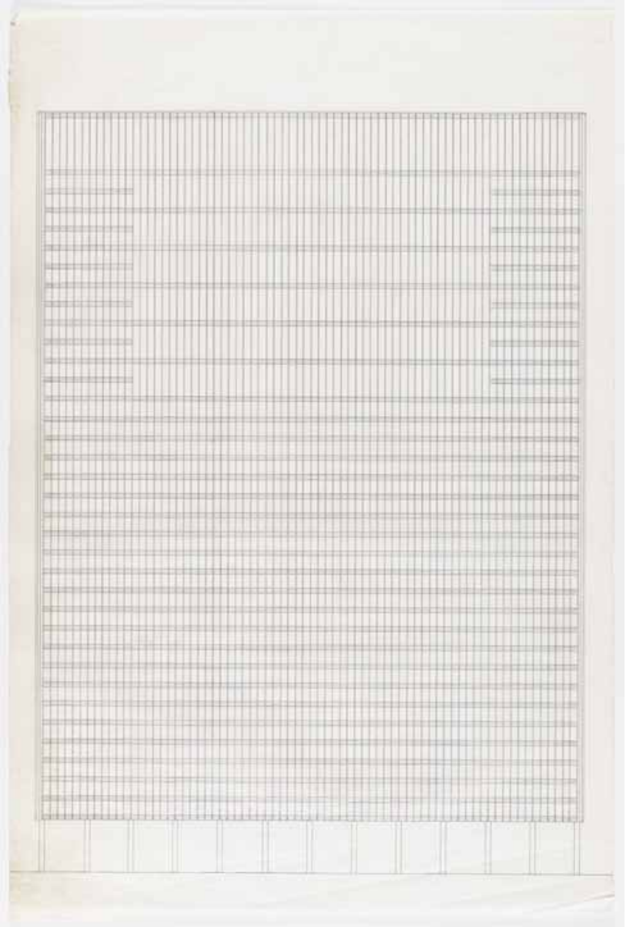


Figure 21 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago Federal Center, Dirksen Courthouse elevation study exploring expression of double-height courtrooms in the upper façade, 1961 (digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY; © 2025 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn).

standardized, modular modern architecture might frame an efficient, up-to-date, businesslike subjectivity, instantiating the values of the administrative state—professional and depoliticized, expert and impersonal—a universe of order to manage the unruly world beyond.

Ordinary citizens visiting the center might also feel the effects of the architecture on their identities. After all, it was for them that the complex was arguably built; as Mayor Daley acidly replied to judges' complaints about losing the Cobb courthouse, "It is fine to talk about beauty and architecture . . . but what we are interested in is service to the people."[93] Where the public entered the buildings, the uniform, modular, modern settings—expressing the state's efficiency, economy, and equality—might identify visiting citizens as collective recipients of expanded postwar government services, even if some might also find these interior spaces impersonal, collective, and bureaucratic (as imaged during this period in representations like painter George Tooker's well-known, dystopic *Government Bureau*, 1956).[94]

The greatest numbers of people met the state architecturally in the Federal Center's open spaces, especially the central plaza. Its asymmetrical, incompletely bounded, dynamic diagonality encouraged pedestrian movement in, through, and beyond the space, as the site sketch plan shows, in effect an urban design correspondence to the interior open-plan offices as spaces of indeterminate adaptability (see Figure 18).[95] The plaza's unencumbered, unguiding plane might activate an American citizen's subjectivity of individuated choice, freedom, and agency, as Cold War political antidote to fascist and communist totalitarianism, as architectural historians Sarah Whiting and Detlef Mertins both argue for Mies's urbanism engendering subjects of enhanced agency, "individualized as an urban consumer," in abstract, empty spaces of "optimistic potential . . . into which a variety of possibilities could be placed."[96] Alongside the accommodation of individual experience, the Chicago Federal Center, endowed with several buildings of cohesive design that were linked across public spaces, might also foster a civic, collective solidarity of citizens aligned with each other and with the state in a space democratically adaptable to future circumstance.

Even before the Federal Center's construction was completed, a further dimension of American citizenship played out through its architecture. Local, white-dominated unions' resistance to Black membership—corollary to Chicago's residential segregation—led to civil rights protests, legal action, and a forceful 1963 letter to union leadership from the GSA:

> It is the position of the United States Government . . . to promote and insure equal opportunity for all qualified persons without regard to race, creed, color or national origin. . . . Is the new U.S. Courthouse to be identified for the rest of our lives as a symbol of segregation and racial prejudice? Are children and students who are familiar with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution . . . to be told in future years . . . that during a period when John F. Kennedy was President of the United States, Negroes were not permitted to work on the construction of this courthouse? I do not want this on my conscience; you do not want it on yours; the Administrator of General Services does not want it on his.[97]

At stake in the architecture of the Chicago Federal Center was no longer just the dignity of the judges, the courts, and the state but also now the inclusion and status of an enlarged American citizenry.

Localized, Nationalized, and Historicized

This architectural history revises interpretation of the Chicago Federal Center as being primarily about the evolution of Mies's design. Coming after the modernist

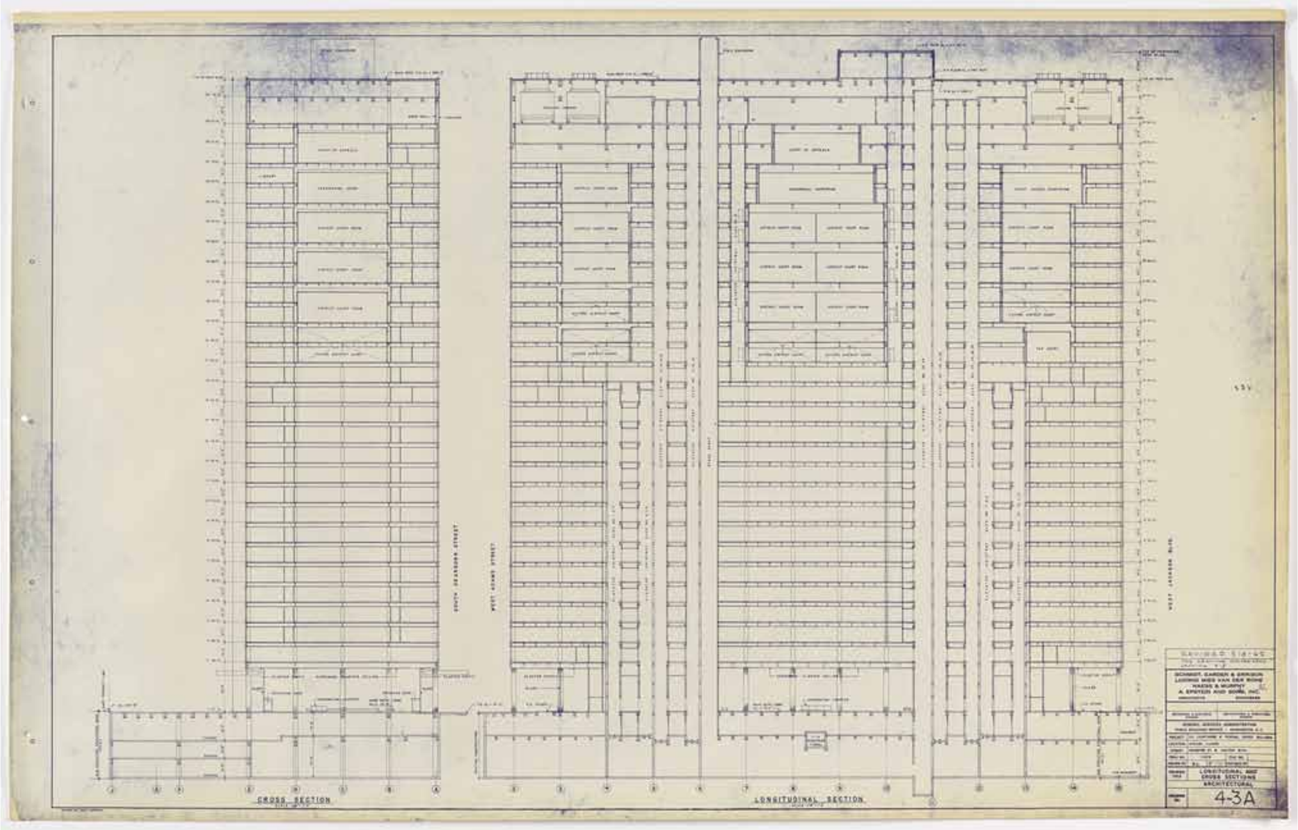


Figure 22 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago Federal Center, Dirksen Courthouse sectional plan showing double-height courtrooms on upper floors, 1961 (digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY; © 2025 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn).

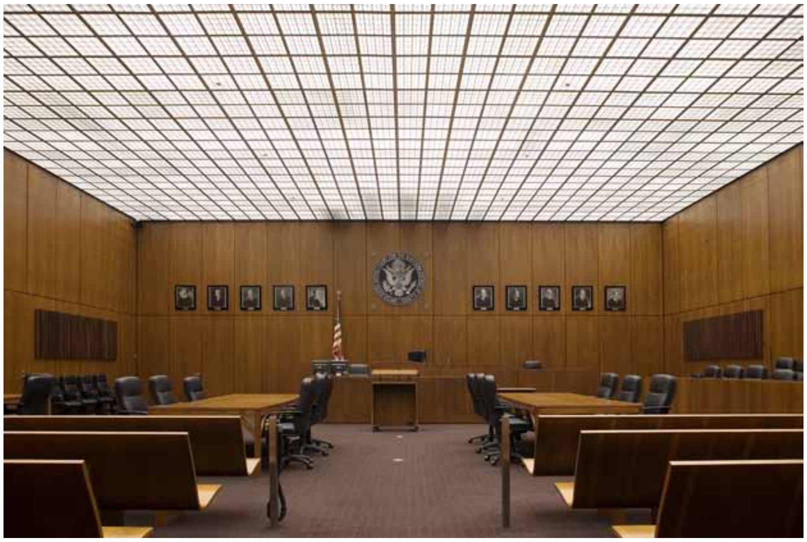


Figure 23 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago Federal Center, 1959–74, interior of a courtroom in the Dirksen Courthouse (photo by Carol M. Highsmith, 2006; Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress).

skyscraper-and-plaza civic centers that had been envisioned repeatedly for Chicago urban renewal since 1949, the Mies office design represented the anchor leg in a local relay as much as a distinctive Mies product. Additionally, the desire and decision for skyscraper solutions for government buildings—whose commercial evocations had been deemed inappropriate for state architecture when the predecessor Cobb federal building was erected—spoke not just to Daley's downtown Chicago renewal agenda but also generally to the twentieth-century rise of the U.S. administrative state. Mies's spare, modular design idiom embodied the ideal U.S. administrative state's businesslike efficiency. But efficiency was not enough to legitimate and represent the state. So the Chicago Federal Center also incorporated

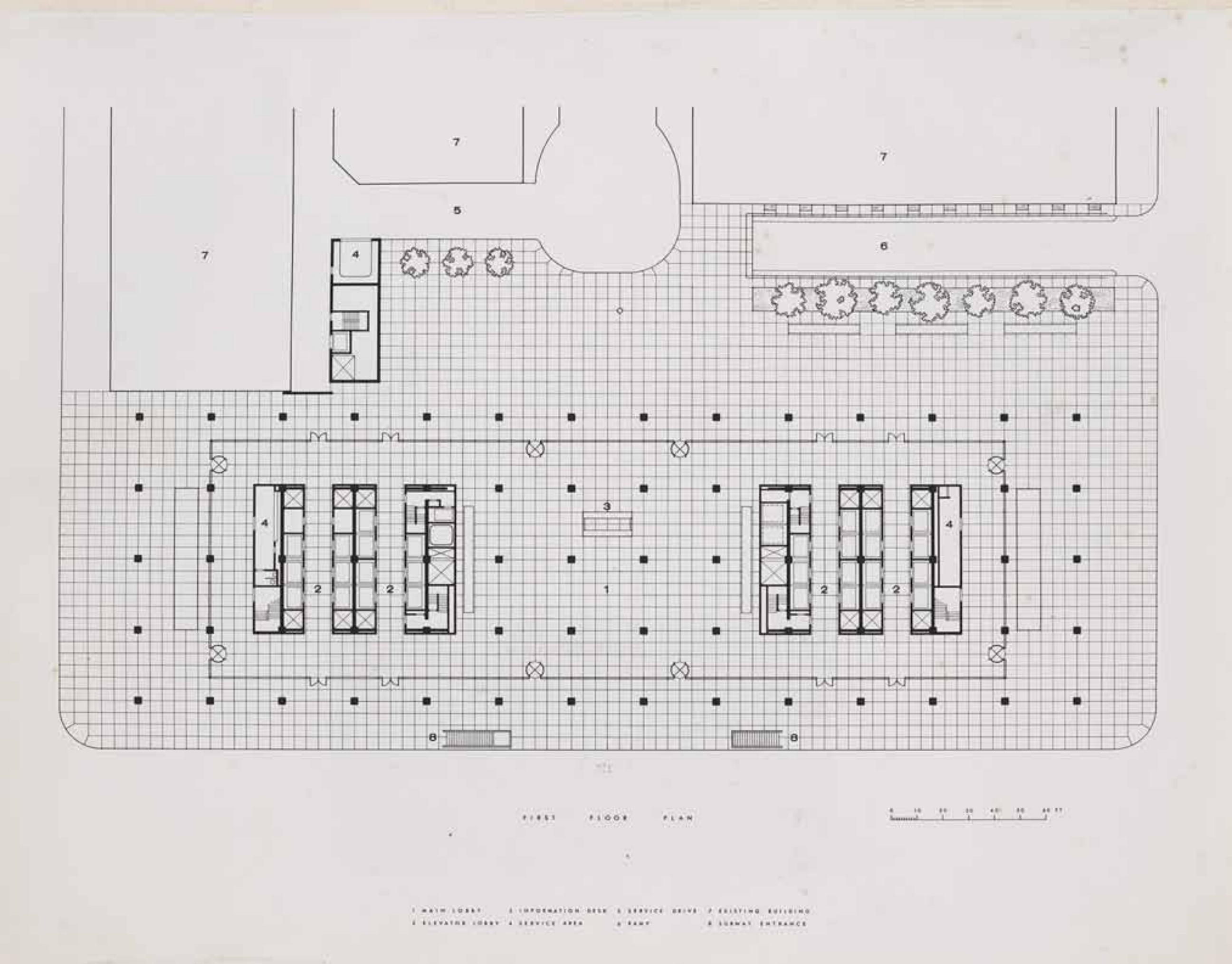


Figure 24 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago Federal Center, Dirksen Courthouse lobby plan with great hall at the center, ca. 1961 (digital image ©The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY; © 2025 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn).

a panoply of subtle civic gestures that both distinguished it from comparable Mies commercial complexes and created a spatial context for American citizenship in relation to the state.

Nor was the Chicago Federal Center alone in its political dimensions. From the 1950s through the 1970s, a series of other landmark American government centers from Boston to Honolulu, incorporating federal, state, and local functions, combined aspects of center-city urban economic redevelopment, asymmetrical site planning, flowing pedestrian spaces, and permeable modernist architecture in a variety of compositions.[98] Close at hand, two blocks north of the Chicago Federal Center, this included the new Chicago Civic Center, a single skyscraper-and-plaza combination housing Cook County offices and courtrooms.[99] In the context of federal buildings, this expression of American government architecture was also being articulated by the later famed 1962 "Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture," a brief statement in a report for President John F. Kennedy that called for U.S. buildings to "provide visual testimony to the dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the American Government" and to "provide efficient and economical facilities," incorporating "the finest contemporary architectural thought" while "reflect[ing] . . . regional architectural traditions," thus avoiding the "development of an official style."[100] The "Guiding Principles," drawn up by young Labor Department staffer Daniel Patrick Moynihan, might have been modeled on the Chicago Federal Center project, but there is no evidence that Moynihan knew of the Chicago design, nor did the "Guiding Principles" have an immediate impact on federal building design and construction.[101] Rather, the epiphenomenal "Guiding Principles" suggests a shared moment among the Chicago Federal Center and other government buildings, when American modernist state architecture was being considered for its urban contexts and political representation.

The Chicago Federal Center's history and significance neither begins nor ends with Mies. After the architect's

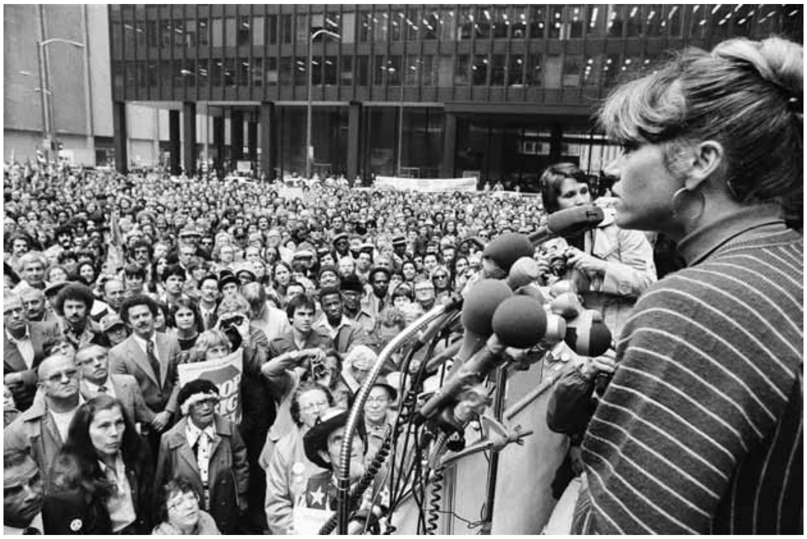


Figure 25 Activist Jane Fonda addressing a rally for the Campaign for Economic Democracy on the plaza of the Chicago Federal Center, 1979 (ST-60002962-0011, Chicago Sun-Times Collection, Chicago History Museum; © Sun-Times Media, LLC, all rights reserved).

1969 death, the GSA commissioned for the center's plaza Alexander Calder's *Flamingo* (1973), an orange-colored organic sculpture standing 53 feet high. It has become a popular tourist attraction, humanizing experience of the complex's unrelenting grids, suggesting possibilities for emotion, transformation, and play. The center has also served as the setting for a raucous parade in the 1986 film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and for a 2015 Chicago Architecture Biennial performance, "We Know How to Order," presented by the African American South Shore Drill Team. The latter offered explicit commentary on Chicago's history of racial segregation, including the federal government's tacit support for the Daley political machine and its de facto segregationist policies.[102]

Since the 1960s, the Federal Center has also been the site of political performance. After antiwar protesters at the 1968 Democratic Convention took Chicago's streets, not just government-designated areas, as sites for civic activism, the Dirksen Courthouse hosted the trials of both Chicago police officers and the antiwar Chicago Seven in 1969. Architecture was both setting and target of Yippie defendant Abbie Hoffman's provocations; in Mies's glowing, gridded courtroom, Hoffman yelled that the place was "a neon oven in a stainless-steel cuckoo nest."[103] In subsequent years, the plaza has been a regular site of political protests about myriad issues, including nuclear weapons, civil rights, economic inequality, and, most recently, the second Trump administration's policies. It is a venue still for performing American citizenship under liberal democracy (Figure 25). Cases in the courtrooms and political demonstrations on the plaza call into question the idea of an apolitical administrative state, and whether the generative vision of architecture contributing to a civil and unified American society has been or can ever be fully realized.

For the last half century the complex has remained relatively unchanged (more courtrooms have been built into the Dirksen's floors), and in 2008, it was officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The landmark designation, rare among postwar American government centers, serves as a testament to Mies's famous name and the coherence of the center's design. This article proposes that the Chicago Federal Center should be evaluated not just as an architectural monument but, through its contextualization in Chicago's urban and architectural history, as a lens for understanding developments and contradictions in American governance, democracy, and citizenship.

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Abstract

The Chicago Federal Center (1959–74) has long been interpreted by architectural critics and historians in relation to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's exploration of a universal architectural language, across a broad range of building types and geographies. When the U.S. federal government commissioned Mies, it had for 150 years elaborated a traditional, and often classical, canon of civic architecture and iconography. Why did the United States then adopt modern forms honed primarily in the commercial realm? This essay argues that, despite the gesture toward universal language, the Chicago Federal Center was importantly rooted in the particularities of place, locality, and history. In Chicago the priorities of a newly expansive federal administrative state intersected with new post–World War II public commitments to urban renewal and revitalization. Boosterish local pride in a usable history associated with steel-frame skyscrapers shaped the Federal Center and crafted its distinct civic form and meaning.

Keywords: Chicago Federal Center; Ludwig Mies van der Rohe; civic centers; postwar urban renewal and revitalization; administrative state architecture; Richard J. Daley; Everett McKinley Dirksen U.S. Courthouse; Franklin Floete

Notes

1. We gratefully acknowledge Judge Joan Powell for her encouragement and special accommodation of our research, Robert Theel for guiding us through the Chicago Federal Center, Paul Galloway for assistance with MoMA's Mies collection, and the Lavin Fund of the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton) for supporting illustration acquisition.

2. Quoted in "The New Government Building," *Chicago Tribune*, 25 Jan. 1895.

3. "Last Stone Set on Postoffice," *Chicago Tribune*, 23 Sept. 1902. On Cobb's federal building in Chicago, see Edward W. Wolner, *Henry Ives Cobb's Chicago: Architecture, Institutions, and the Making of a Modern Metropolis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 252–64.

4. Phyllis Lambert, "Mies Immersion," in *Mies in America*, ed. Phyllis Lambert (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 199, also 407ff.; Dietrich Neumann, *Mies van der Rohe: An Architect in His Time* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2024), 12, 13, 365. See also Franz Schulze and Edward Windhorst, *Mies van Der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 342–47; Carl Condit, *Chicago 1930–70: Building, Planning, and Urban Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 129–34; David R. Shanks, "Who, Mies? Interrogating the Federal Center Courthouse," *Journal of Architectural Education* 73, no. 1 (Mar. 2019), 22.

5. Thomas Leslie, *Chicago Skyscrapers, 1934–1986: How Technology, Politics, Finance, and Race Reshaped the City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023), 179–85.

6. "The Chicago Government Building," *Harper's Weekly* 41 (12 June 1897), 594.

7. See Wolner, *Henry Ives Cobb's Chicago*, 258–61. Wolner juxtaposes his analysis of Cobb's federal building with a discussion of Hunt's Administration Building and the World's Columbian Exposition's planning more generally.

8. Daniel H. Burnham, Edward H. Bennett, and Charles Moore, *Plan of Chicago* (1909; repr., New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993), 1.

9. "New Federal Building in Chicago," *Chicago Tribune*, 24 Mar. 1958.

10. Franklin G. Floete to Honorable Walter J. La Buy, 21 Jan. 1959, RG269, Records of the General Services Administration, Administrator's General Subject File 1959–1961, Buildings and Grounds, Box 13, National Archives and Record Center, College Park, Maryland (hereafter, all material designated RG269 is located in the National Archives and Record Center, College Park, Maryland).

11. In 1883, the young political scientist and future President Woodrow Wilson proposed, "The field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics." Quoted in Joseph Postell, *Bureaucracy in America: The Administrative State's Challenge to Constitutional Government* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017), 175.

12. For Chicago-area federal employee figures and locations, see Franklin G. Floete to F. Moran McConihe, 15 May 1957, NA, RG269, Records of the General Services Administration, Administrator's General Subject File 1959–1961, Buildings and Grounds Case Folders, Box 21 (hereafter, all GSA materials found in this particular box are simply designated RG269 / Box 21); John Chapman, Regional Commissioner, to Franklin G. Floete, 16 Dec. 1958, RG269 / Box 21; "Prospectus for Proposed Construction Under Public Buildings Act of 1959: Courthouse and Federal Office Building, Chicago," 11 Sept. 1959, NA, RG121, Box 3; Chicago Plan Commission, *Chicago Civic Center* (Chicago: Chicago Plan Commission, 1949). On the American administrative state generally, see Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Matthew A. Crenson and Francis E. Rourke, "By Way of Conclusion: American Bureaucracy Since World War II," in *The New American State: Bureaucracies and Policies Since World War II*, ed. Louis Galambos (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

13. Anne M. Kornhauser, *Debating the American State: Liberal Anxieties and the New Liberalism, 1930–1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 13, 16, 235n26. See also Postell, *Bureaucracy in America*.

14. Quoted in Joanna Grisinger, *The Unwieldy American State: Administrative Politics Since the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 182.

15. Franklin G. Floete to Honorable Sidney R. Yates, 9 Apr. 1958, RG269, Records of the General Services Administration, Administrator's General Subject and Congressional Liaison Files, 1956–1968, Box 27. Holabird & Roche's Boston Store (1905) on Madison Street was converted to office use as the State-Madison Building, and in 1958 the federal government leased 333,169 square feet in the building for use by the Internal Revenue Service, the Treasury Department, and the Labor Department.

16. Quoted in Carrie Albee, "Forward Atlanta: G. Lloyd Preacher and the Atlanta City Hall," in *Skyscraper Gothic: Medieval Style and Modernist Buildings*, ed. Kevin D. Murphy and Lisa Reilly (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 148.

17. Chicago Plan Commission, *Chicago Civic Center*. See also "Chicago Civic Center," *Architectural Forum* 90, no. 5 (May 1949), 93–95.

18. Robert G. Spinney, *City of Big Shoulders: A History of Chicago*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Northern Illinois University Press, 2021), chap. 10.

19. Mies van der Rohe, "Museum," in "New Buildings for 194X," special issue, *Architectural Forum* 78, no. 5 (May 1943), 84–85.

20. Sigfried Giedion, "The Need for a New Monumentality," in *New Architecture and City Planning: A Symposium*, ed. Paul Zucker (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), 568; J. L. Sert, F. Léger, and S. Giedion, "Nine Points on Monumentality" (1943), in Sigfried Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 50.

21. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, in "In Search of a New Monumentality: A Symposium," *Architectural Review* 104 (Sept. 1948), 124; George Nelson, "Stylistic Trends in Contemporary Architecture," in Zucker, *New Architecture and City Planning*, 573–74.

22. "Plan Huge Civic Governmental Office Center—Commission Outlines a Skyscraper Area," *Chicago Tribune*, 16 Mar. 1949. New York's 1930s Rockefeller Center may also have inspired Chicago's skyscraper-and-plaza scheme.

23. According to historian Sarah Whiting, these massive surgical excisions created a tabula rasa for the modern rebuilding of Chicago. Sarah Whiting, "Bas-Relief Urbanism: Chicago's Figured Field," in Lambert, *Mies in America*, 647–52.

24. Joel Rast, *Remaking Chicago: The Political Origins of Urban Industrial Change* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999), 70.

25. Chicago Plan Commission, *Chicago Civic Center*, 1.

26. Chicago Plan Commission, 10.

27. Chicago Plan Commission, 18, 21.

28. On the Kennelly administration, see Spinney, *City of Big Shoulders*, chap. 10.

29. Committee for Government Buildings Downtown, with Tibor J. Haring, "A Proposal to Retain the Governmental Function in Downtown Chicago," 1957, Legislative File, f.3516, Everett McKinley Dirksen Collection, Dirksen Congressional Center, Pekin, Illinois. On the Fort Dearborn plan, see Leslie, *Chicago Skyscrapers*, 103–4.

30. Larry Bennett, *The Third City: Chicago and American Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 40; see also Department of

City Planning, Chicago, *Development Plan for the Central Area of Chicago* (Chicago: Department of City Planning, 1958). On Daley and the 1958 development plan, see also Roger Biles, *Richard J. Daley: Politics, Race, and the Governing of Chicago* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1995), 47–49; Rast, *Remaking Chicago*, 7, 26–30.

31. D. Bradford Hunt and Jon B. DeVries, *Planning Chicago* (Chicago: American Planning Association, 2013), 7.

32. Spinney, *City of Big Shoulders*, 200, 201.

33. Spinney, 208. See also Leslie, *Chicago Skyscrapers*, 102–6.

34. Department of City Planning, *Development Plan*, 16.

35. Rast, *Remaking Chicago*, 47.

36. Department of City Planning, *Development Plan*, 18.

37. Department of City Planning, Chicago, *Chicago Civic Center: Major Proposal of the Development Plan* (Chicago: Department of City Planning, 1959), 24; Department of City Planning, *Development Plan*, 14.

38. Sigfried Giedion, "Historical Background of the Core," in *The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life*, ed. J. Tyrwhitt, J. L. Sert, and E. N. Rogers (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1952), 20; Josep Lluis Sert, "Centres of Community Life," in Tyrwhitt et al., *Heart of the City*, 6. See also Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928–1960* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 200–215.

39. Rast, *Remaking Chicago*, 71.

40. Yates Bill, introduced 26 May 1958.

41. George R. Bailey, President, Building Managers Association of Chicago, "Statement Regarding the Location of Proposed New Federal Building in Downtown Area of Chicago," 9 Dec. 1958, RG269 / Box 21.

42. Quoted in "Site Selection for New U.S. Buildings Near," *Chicago Tribune*, 10 Dec. 1958, emphasis added.

43. Bailey, "Statement Regarding the Location," 9.

44. "Site Selection for New U.S. Buildings Near."

45. Charles B. Genther to Franklin G. Floete, 13 Dec. 1958, RG269 / Box 21.

46. Chapman to Floete, 16 Dec. 1958.

47. Condit, *Chicago 1930–70*, 130.

48. See Al Chase, "Two More Loop Landmarks Will Be Razed to Solve Subway Problem," *Chicago Tribune*, 21 Jan. 1940; "Finish Survey of Site for U.S. Court Building," *Chicago Tribune*, 14 Jan. 1959; "A Pair of World's Tallest Motor Hotels for the Loop," *Chicago Tribune*, 2 June 1929.

49. 1950 United States Federal Census, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois, Enumeration District 103–44.

50. Judge Walter J. La Buy to Franklin G. Floete, 8 Jan. 1959, RG269, Records of the General Services Administration, Administrator's General Subject File 1959–1961, Buildings and Grounds, Box 13.

51. Quoted in "Views on New Federal Bldg. Site Differ," *Chicago Tribune*, 8 Jan. 1959.

52. Thomas B. Stauffer to Noble W. Lee, 12 Mar. and 2 Apr. 1963, Box 1, Chicago Heritage Committee Papers, Chicago History Museum; see also the account in Daniel Bluestone, *Buildings, Landscapes, and Memory: Case Studies in Historic Preservation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 180–81.

53. David Norris to Richard Nickel, 29 Dec. 1961, Box 1, Richard Nickel Papers, Chicago History Museum Archives.

54. Floete to La Buy, 21 Jan. 1959.

55. Out of 1,406 solicitations, 37 firms responded. The four selected firms were invited to Washington before being appointed: Epstein for electrical work, Murphy for structural, and Schmidt, Garden & Erickson for mechanical. NA, RG269 / Box 21. These three firms were promoted to the GSA by Senator Dirksen and Mayor Daley. See also Joseph Fujikawa, "Interview with Joseph Fujikawa," by Betty J. Blum (1983), 13, and Gene Summers, "Oral History of Gene Summers," interviewed by Pauline A. Saliga (1987), 13, 70, both interviews compiled under the auspices of the Chicago Architects Oral History Project, Ernest R. Graham Study Center for Architectural Drawings, Department of Architecture, Art Institute of Chicago; Leslie, *Chicago Skyscrapers*, 180. See also National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, "Chicago Federal Center," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 2011, sec. 8, p. 2; Gene Summers, "In Conversation with Kevin Harrington" (1996–97), transcript, 175, Mies and His American Colleagues Oral History Project, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal.

56. Summers, "Oral History," 70–71.

57. Joseph Fujikawa, an associate in the Mies firm, later reported that word had circulated that the General Services Administration "wanted a good building." Fujikawa, "Interview," 13.

58. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, *Mies in His Own Words: Complete Writings, Speeches, and Interviews 1922–1969*, ed. Vittorio Pizzigoni and Michelangelo Sabatino (Berlin: DOM, 2024), 149, 250.

59. Summers, "In Conversation," 179, 186.

60. F. Moran McConihe to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 2 May 1957, Box 28, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

61. Ira J. Bach to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 28 Nov. 1955 and 13 June 1960, Box 23, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. On Bach, see Biles, *Richard J. Daley*, 46.

62. The resolution quoted was offered by Alderman Leon M. Despres: "A Resolution Adopted by the City Council of the City of Chicago, Illinois," 30 Mar. 1966, Box 23, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

63. Walter Oleksy, "Glass Court Will Replace Granite One," *Chicago Tribune*, 31 May 1960.

64. "Modular Assembly," *Progressive Architecture*, Nov. 1957, 122.

65. "Modular Assembly," 118, 120; William Demarest, "Modular Measure," *Progressive Architecture*, Nov. 1957, 178.

66. Rast, *Remaking Chicago*, 71.

67. Summers, "In Conversation," 182–83.

68. Ralph Clark Chandler, "Epilogue," in *A Centennial History of the American Administrative State*, ed. Ralph Clark Chandler (New York: Free Press, 1987), 579. See also Graham T. Allison, *Public and Private Management: Are They Fundamentally Alike in All Unimportant Respects?* (Cambridge, Mass.: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1980).

69. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "The Architecture of Bureaucracy and the Architecture of Genius," *Architectural Review* 101 (Jan. 1947), 6.

70. Lambert, *Mies in America*, 578–92; Summers, "In Conversation," esp. 175, 181, 197; Fujikawa quoted in Neumann, *Mies van der Rohe*, 12. Edward Duckett made models for Mies's firm between 1944 and 1965. Lambert, *Mies in America*, 198, 215; Schulze and Windhorst, *Mies van der Rohe*, 343, 461n9; Leslie, *Chicago Skyscrapers*, 182.

71. Summers, "In Conversation," 178, 180.

72. Fujikawa, "Interview," 14.

73. Summers, "In Conversation," 179. Joe Fujikawa later stated that with the Chicago Federal Center's design Mies "was mostly concerned with the proportions and arrangements of the plaza." Quoted in Neumann, *Mies van der Rohe*, 365.

74. "Riverine flow of space" is how the Federal Center's urban design is characterized in Lambert, *Mies in America*, 275. On Mies's urban design, see also Sarah Whiting, "Opening Up Pandora's Box: Postwar Modernism in the United States," in *Tra guerra e pace: Società, cultura e archittura nel seconda dopoguerra*, ed. Patrizia Bonifazio, Sergio Pace, Michela Rosso, and Paolo Scrivano (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1998); Detlef Mertins, "Living in a Jungle: Mies, Organic Architecture, and the Art of City Building," in Lambert, *Mies in America*.

75. Summers, "In Conversation," 193.

76. Lambert, *Mies in America*, 409; see also Franklin G. Floete to Roger L. Stevens and Philip D. Anderson, 9 Apr. 1959, RG269 / Box 21.

77. In 1950, the census enumerator visited the Central Hotel at 444 South State, where he found 108 residents living in the six-story building, two blocks from the Cobb federal building; he wrote, "Central Hotel is a flop house although the rates paid does not allow it to be classified as such." 1950 United States Federal Census, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois, Enumeration District 103-46, see also Enumeration Districts 103-27, 103-30, 103-45, 103-46, 103-47, 103-48, 103-50, 103-51, 103-52, 103-53, 103-55; Sanborn Map Company, *Insurance Maps, Chicago Illinois*, vol. 1, *South Division* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1906–50).

78. Department of City Planning, *Development Plan*, 20; Rast, *Remaking Chicago*, 47–59.

79. Chapman to Floete, 16 Dec. 1958.

80. It was immaterial to the GSA and the Mies office that walling off the plaza to the south blocked sunlight, as noted critically by Neumann, *Mies van der Rohe*, 365.

81. Everett McKinley Dirksen to F. Richard Meyer III, 26 Mar. 1958, and F. Richard Meyer III to Everett McKinley Dirksen, 21 Mar. 1958, Legislative File, f.3517b, Everett McKinley Dirksen Collection, Dirksen Congressional Center, Pekin, Illinois. Direct appropriation diminished the GSA's managerial control, and the legislation was passed over Floete's objection. Franklin G. Floete to Honorable Dennis Chavez, Chair, Committee on Public Works, U.S. Senate, 23 May 1958, Legislative File, f.3516, Everett McKinley Dirksen Collection, Dirksen Congressional Center, Pekin, Illinois; "Proposes U.S. Skyscraper for Chicago," *Chicago Tribune*, 20 Mar. 1958; Representative Sidney R. Yates, "Congressional Newsletter," 206 (17 Apr. 1958), Sidney R. Yates Papers, Chicago History Museum Archives; Bill to End Lease-Purchase System, Senate Bill 2261, 85th Congress, Session 1. See also Judith H. Robinson and Stephanie S. Foell, *Growth, Efficiency, and Modernism: GSA Buildings of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s* (Washington, D.C.: General Services Administration, 2003), 38–41.

82. National Park Service, "Chicago Federal Center."

83. Tentative Sketches 21-5, 21-6, and 21-7, Mies Van der Rohe Archive, Museum of Modern Art (Queens).

84. Drawing nos. 5904.40, 101, 103, 104, Mies Van der Rohe Archive, Museum of Modern Art (Queens).

85. Summers, "In Conversation," 183.

86. Floete to La Buy, 21 Jan. 1959.

87. "Interiors for the Federal Government," *Progressive Architecture*, July 1965, 173. The original courtrooms were located on the upper floors of the building, from the seventeenth to the twenty-seventh floor. They included a large ceremonial courtroom for the whole of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, numerous midsize courtrooms for the district judges individually, and some smaller tax and magistrate's courtrooms.

88. Franz Schulze and George E. Danforth, eds., *An Illustrated Catalogue of the Mies van der Rohe Drawings in the Museum of Modern Art*, vol. 18 (New York: Garland, 1992), 184, 194, 195, 196, 197, 200, 205, 207, 219.

89. Preliminary courtroom floor plan, 5904.107, Mies van der Rohe Archive, Museum of Modern Art (Queens), in Schulze and Danforth, *Illustrated Catalogue*, 217.

90. "Mies Designs Federal Center," *Architectural Record*, Mar. 1965, 126; "Interiors for the Federal Government," 174.

91. The Seagram Building, the Toronto-Dominion Center, and the adjacent Kluczynski Federal Building all feature peripheral, smaller lobbies. Perhaps the best comparable is the broad, open, welcoming central lobby at the Mies firm's Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, the main public library in Washington, D.C. (1965–68).

92. "Mies Designs Federal Center," 126.

93. "Mayor Favors New U.S. Court Building Here," *Chicago Tribune*, 16 Jan. 1959.

94. Most of the complex's square footage was out-of-bounds to the general public. Nearly the whole of the Kluczynski Federal Building, when it opened in 1974, was filled with back offices for an alphabet soup of federal departments and regulatory agencies—EPA, IRS, FCC, Labor Department—visited only by those with specific business. The same applied to the lower floors of the Dirksen Courthouse, housing offices of the SBA, ICC, GSA, and FBI. The main exception was the State Department's Passport Agency, which was regularly thronged. Chicago Telephone Directory, Illinois Bell, July 1975, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/usteledirec.usteledirec04938x (accessed 28 June 2024).

95. On diagonal planning, see Neil Levine, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Diagonal Planning Revisited," in *On and by Frank Lloyd Wright : A Primer of Architectural Principles*, ed. Robert McCarter (London: Phaidon, 2012).

96. Whiting, "Bas-Relief Urbanism," 644; Whiting, "Opening Up Pandora's Box," 290–91. See also Mertins, "Living in a Jungle," 63. Alternately, a vast, open American Cold War space might engender paranoid agoraphobia, the tone of the famous Cary Grant-fleeing-airplane scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959).

97. Dominic A. Tesauro to Edward J. McMahon, 15 Apr. 1963, RG269 / Box 21.

98. Daniel M. Abramson, "Effects, Fictions, and Contradictions of American Government Architecture," *Grey Room*, no. 101 (Fall 2025), 82–101; Don J. Hibbard, *Democracy by Design: The Planning and Development of the Hawaii State Capitol* (Honolulu: Hawai'i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, 2019). See also Carol Herselle Krinsky, "St. Petersburg-on-the-Hudson: The Albany Mall," in *Art the Ape of Nature: Studies in Honor of H. W. Janson*, ed. Moshe Barasch, Lucy Freeman Sandler, and Patricia Egan (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981).

99. On the Chicago Civic Center by C. F. Murphy Associates; Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; and Loebl, Schlossman & Bennett, see Leslie, *Chicago Skyscrapers*, 185–96; Condit, *Chicago 1930–70*, 134–41. On Chicago downtown revitalization, see Hunt and DeVries, *Planning Chicago*, 3–96.

100. Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Office Space, *Report to the President by the Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Office Space* (printed for the Committee of Public Works, U.S. House of Representatives) (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1962), 11–12.

101. Later, Moynihan recalled Mies's Seagram Building as modeling the era's "best." Quoted in Nathan Glazer, "Daniel P. Moynihan and Federal Architecture," in *From a Cause to a Style: Modernist Architecture's Encounter with the American City* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 150. In the Papers of Daniel P. Moynihan (Box I:112) at the Library of Congress, there is no evidence Moynihan knew of the Chicago Federal Center or any other federal projects outside Washington, D.C. See also Godfrey Hodgson, *The Gentleman from New York: Daniel Patrick Moynihan; A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 78–80; Karen Patricia Heath, "Daniel Patrick Moynihan and His 'Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture' (1962)," *P.S.: Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 2 (Apr. 2017), 384–86; U.S. General Services Administration, *Vision + Voice: Design Excellence in Federal Architecture: Building a Legacy* (Washington, D.C.: GSA, 2002); Robinson and Foell, *Growth, Efficiency, and Modernism*, 45; Lois Craig and the Staff of the Federal Architecture Project, *The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in United States Government Building* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), 542.

102. "We Know How to Order," Bryony Roberts Studio, https://www.bryonyroberts.com/projects#/we-know-how-to-order (accessed 30 Aug. 2024).

103. Quoted in Shanks, "Who, Mies?," 22, 29. The judge in the case was Julius Hoffman (no relation to Abbie), who in 1959 had guided the condemnation proceedings whereby the government took land on the east side of Dearborn Street for the new Federal Center. "Act to Acquire Courthouse Land," *Chicago Tribune*, 5 May 1959.