



U.S. General Services Administration
PUBLIC BUILDINGS SERVICE



Achieving Great Federal Public Spaces

A Property Manager's Guide



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U.S. General Services Administration

Public Buildings Service

Office of the Chief Architect

Center for Federal Buildings and Modernizations

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Foreword

The U.S. General Services Administration builds and manages federal buildings, courthouses, and ports of entry that do more than meet the workplace needs of our clients. These public buildings play an equally important symbolic role, demonstrating the accessibility of our democracy and showcasing the government's commitment to communities nationwide. The plazas, lobbies, atria, and grounds that grace our buildings are frequently among the most significant public spaces in their neighborhoods. They host civic events, promote urban revitalization, support beautification efforts, and become beloved landmarks.

While the most evident spaces may be those found at our new facilities, a significant opportunity for urban development is present at our existing buildings as well. Indeed, these interior and exterior public spaces have the benefit—or burden—of longstanding history in their neighborhoods. Where these spaces succeed, they convey a positive image of the federal government, showcase agency programs, and earn the appreciation of their neighbors. Where they need improvement, these spaces send a less positive message, but represent an enormous potential to turn things around.

This is where *Achieving Great Federal Public Spaces: A Property Manager's Guide* can be most useful. GSA has no greater asset than the buildings we manage and no more qualified experts than our property managers, who maintain them on a daily basis. This guide provides them with an innovative evaluation tool, based on the notion that even the best spaces can be improved, while those spaces that are underperforming deserve renewed attention. To effect these positive changes, this guide suggests short-, medium-, and long-term improvements that have proven successful elsewhere.

With these tools, property managers can proceed confidently in assessing their public space assets from the ground up and in devising low-cost solutions that reap long-term benefits. Doing so achieves the goals of urban development and positive first impressions espoused by the Public Buildings Service, improves the experience of employees and the public who use our buildings, and enhances the long-term value of our federal inventory.

Achieving Great Federal Public Spaces represents a renewed commitment to the role our public spaces play in providing world-class workplaces and creating lasting symbols of government in their communities. I urge you to join me in this commitment, to evaluate our public spaces with fresh eyes and to recapture their full value for our clients and our citizens.

David L. Winstead

Commissioner of the Public Buildings Service
U.S. General Services Administration

SECTION 1

Introduction

How to Use This Book

Achieving Great Federal Public Spaces provides GSA property managers with the tools to successfully evaluate and improve the public spaces in and around federal facilities. It is designed as a hands-on resource with exercises to complete on-site—by yourself or with a group of partners. It is also a source of reference that you will want to keep handy for ideas and inspiration. As you take concrete steps to make your public spaces better, use this book as a guide to help you navigate the process.

Section 1 outlines why public spaces are important to GSA, our clients, and the communities where we operate. It concludes with GSA's Public Space Action Points, which form the framework for the rest of the book.

Section 2 contains GSA's Place Audit, an on-site evaluation exercise that will help you quickly determine which aspects of a facility's public spaces are working well and which are not.

Section 3 shows how you can improve the performance of public spaces with a range of short-, medium-, and long-term solutions. The worksheets provided will help you organize your ideas effectively.

Section 4 explores the process of moving from thought to action. It outlines a step-by-step method of implementation, describes case studies of successful GSA public space projects, and presents the underlying principles that lead to optimal results.

Section 5 provides contacts and other resources that you can use to address inquiries and concerns that fall beyond the scope of this book.

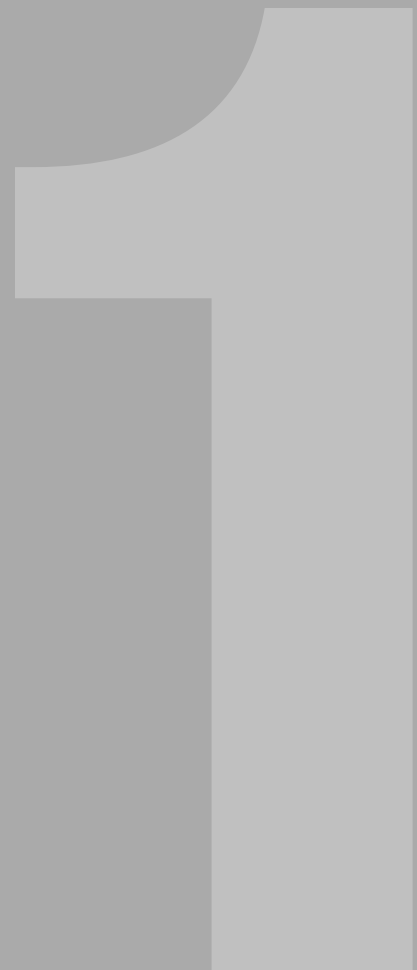
1 INTRODUCTION

2 EVALUATION

3 SOLUTIONS

4 IMPLEMENTATION

5 RESOURCES



The Return of the Civic Center

From the town greens of New England to the plazas of the Southwest, the United States enjoys a great legacy of civic centers, but for decades much of this rich heritage has gone to waste. Poorly maintained, underused, or overrun by automobiles, most of our civic districts have lost their rightful purpose: to sustain the economic and social vitality of cities.

Too often, areas where civic buildings are clustered together appear sterile, cold, and lifeless. They are no longer places where one can have the regular, random encounters that foster the kind of social contact that renowned urbanist Jane Jacobs called “the small change from which a city’s wealth of public life may grow.” In other words, they fail as public spaces, leading to squandered economic opportunities and public indifference to—or even distrust of—civic institutions.

Frequently located in downtown cores, federal properties are uniquely positioned to reverse this trend. In fact, some are already beginning to play a vital role in the resurgence of civic centers. Facilities such as the Kluczynski Plaza in Chicago and Hanley Courthouse Plaza in Syracuse now host numerous events and serve as community gathering places. They have made the transition from underutilized assets to successful public spaces that spur economic growth, promote civic engagement, and enhance the image of the federal government.

Local governments are also catching on to the value of public spaces to their civic districts and downtowns. Many projects are coming about

now because public officials, planners and citizens alike are beginning to understand that public life—meaning active, vital public spaces—is essential to the economic and social wellbeing of city centers. Portland’s Pioneer Courthouse Square and Boston’s Post Office Square, both built where parking garages once stood, are two premier public spaces that cities have reclaimed from once-derelict areas.

To get an idea just how big a difference great public spaces can make, look to the surprising turnaround underway in Detroit. The city is re-energizing its downtown with new residences, commercial areas, and office buildings – all centered around a public space plan. The centerpiece of this plan is the new Campus Martius Park, a two-acre civic square in the heart of downtown that debuted in November 2004. Already, new tenants (including Compuware corporate headquarters) have leased significant amounts of office space in the area around the park, developers are building new housing, and businesses are returning. The park has given downtown a much needed source of positive identity, appearing on national television as the venue for the 2006 Super Bowl pre-game broadcast. Detroit still has a long way to go, but its downtown renaissance would never have even gotten off the ground without Campus Martius Park.

Local governments are also catching on to the value of public spaces to their civic districts and downtowns. Public life—meaning active, vital public spaces—is essential to the economic and social wellbeing of city centers.

More than any other single institution, GSA can play a major role in shaping the future of America's civic centers. Since federal properties comprise a vast collection of public spaces in more than 2000 communities just begging to be transformed into first-class civic places, GSA is poised to lead a renaissance throughout the nation.

Clearly, there are many challenges to overcome if GSA is to fulfill this potential. The good news is that, with exceptional management, even the most desolate public space can be turned around. Speeding traffic can be tamed to create an atmosphere conducive to walking and gathering. Blank walls can be activated to make people feel comfortable and safe. Sterile spaces can be enlivened to attract people throughout the year.

A sustained commitment to a civic vision can surmount such obstacles. This commitment must come from every group with a stake in the project—building tenants, community groups, local merchant associations, public officials, neighborhood leaders, the list goes on. These are the people who will bring to bear their ideas, their labor as volunteers, and their ability to draw support from various constituencies – all critical to the success of any revitalization effort. GSA property managers can initiate such a vision and unleash the energy to see it through. This guide will show you how to get started.

More than any other single institution, GSA can play a major role in shaping the future of America's civic centers.

Federal Spaces as Civic Places

“It is difficult to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished.”

William H. Whyte

Federal properties are at their best when they function as extensions of the communities in which they are located. Ideally, courthouses, seats of government, and other federal facilities should serve as great civic places – the “front porches” of the public realm. If they function in their true civic role, they can be the settings where celebrations are held, where exchanges both social and economic take place, and where cultures mix. When they work well, they are valued as places that bring people together and belong to local residents.

BENEFITS OF GREAT CIVIC PLACES

The rewards of creating great civic places are numerous. Not only do better public spaces enrich the lives of the people who use them, they also make surrounding neighborhoods more desirable, attracting investment and spurring revitalization. They endow the civic realm with credibility and prestige – not just visually, but also by providing a sense of community and a forum for public activity. They anchor downtowns, acting as foundations for healthy growth. All of these benefits add up to greater livability.

Great civic places benefit all kinds of communities, from dense urban neighborhoods and downtowns to small towns and suburbs. The following benefits focus primarily on the importance of these places to urban centers, but they are applicable to every community.

CIVIC PLACES GIVE IDENTITY TO CITIES

Without great civic places, there would be no great cities. For example, the public spaces around Rockefeller Center are some of the most-visited attractions in New York City. In Washington DC, places like the National Mall and the interior of Union Station shape people’s lasting impressions of the city. These public spaces represent New York and Washington the way the Louvre represents Paris.

Great civic places provide a sense of community and a forum for public activity. They anchor downtowns, acting as foundations for healthy growth. All of these benefits add up to greater livability.

While people travel thousands of miles to experience such revered places as Boston Common, the squares of Savannah, or Balboa Park in San Diego, others need only walk down the street to find places they treasure. Indeed, great public spaces can be world-renowned, or they can simply be community places valued by the people who live in a particular neighborhood. Community places are just as important to the identity of cities as their more famous counterparts, because that is where people live, work, meet each other, and experience their neighborhood. These places instill a shared sense of pride and ownership among cities’ diverse populations.

Public Space Goals

FOR GSA BUILDINGS

GSA buildings and public spaces should:

Reflect the dignity and accessibility of government

The actions that government takes in and around its buildings send a clear signal about its priorities. When people see well-maintained and attractive spaces and buildings, they gain confidence in government and feel more comfortable working with federal institutions.

Be secure and welcoming

GSA properties can achieve first-rate security without resorting to a fortress mentality. Innovative security measures both improve building safety and make visitors feel welcome in the property's public spaces.

Improve tenant satisfaction and building revenue

Better GSA public spaces mean more desirable workplaces. And, as discussed in the next section, better workplaces mean lower vacancy rates and more revenue.

Provide a forum for tenant activity and public use

Public spaces work best for people when they accommodate a variety of activity. By improving the design and amenities of GSA public spaces, federal properties can better support use by tenants and the public.

Act as a catalyst for downtown revitalization

Public spaces like those around GSA buildings need to function at their best to add value to downtowns, making them attractive places to work and live. By transforming GSA's public spaces into multi-purpose destinations, our facilities can spur revitalization beyond the property line.

CIVIC PLACES BENEFIT CITIES ECONOMICALLY

Great civic places impart many real and measurable economic benefits, like the effect of high-quality public space on a district's property values. Properties that face Boston's Post Office Square, for instance, enjoy lease rates 10 percent higher than those without a park view. In San Francisco, the construction of new and improved green space has led to significant increases in property values, which in turn have boosted tax revenues for the local government.

Another way public spaces achieve economic goals is by hosting public markets. In New York, the Greenmarket at Union Square has been a major catalyst in the revitalization of the surrounding neighborhood, boosting residential construction and providing opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurship. The River Market in Little Rock, Arkansas has made an even more impressive impact on that city's downtown, spurring the development of residential apartments, a museum, and a sports arena.

Revitalizing streets as places for walking and gathering can also benefit a city or town economically. In New Haven, Connecticut, street improvements that incorporated wider sidewalks, large trees, enhanced parking, and a leasing and development program conceived by local residents helped bring downtown's Chapel Street back to life, rejuvenating businesses in a crucial area of the city.

CIVIC PLACES PROVIDE SETTINGS FOR CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Public spaces can provide free, open forums for people to enjoy art, performances, and other cultural activities. From “Shakespeare in the Park” festivals to string quartets at a downtown plaza, good places foster and enhance a city’s cultural life. For example, Providence, Rhode Island’s WaterFire, an award winning fire and music installation, has had an impressive cultural and economic impact, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors to the downtown riverfront on summer and fall evenings. A symbol of the city’s renaissance, WaterFire brings people to a central urban area that was typically deserted after dark. Events like this set the stage for positive social interaction.

NEW ROLES FOR GSA

For federal properties to capture all the benefits of civic places, GSA must adopt a “place-oriented” approach to designing, locating and managing buildings and public spaces. Using a place-oriented approach means considering the place first and foremost – the lobby for example – and then determining how to make that place work better from the standpoint of the people who will use it. It means posing questions such as: Who has a stake in this place? What would they like to see happen in it? How can the place be designed and managed to support those activities?

In contrast, the more common “project-oriented” approach defines problems narrowly – repair and alteration of the lobby – and getting the project completed on time and on budget is of paramount importance. How well the lobby actually works for pedestrian flow and queuing, displays of art, or as an event venue, for instance, is not considered a priority from the outset. Ironically, the costs of a project-oriented approach ultimately add up down the road, as retrofitting, redesign and mitigation are often required after the fact.

Committing to a place-oriented approach translates into new roles for both GSA buildings and the people who manage them. It is a demanding but exciting challenge, which if successful will make GSA an important catalyst for greater livability in cities throughout the United States. When managed as dynamic places, our facilities and the spaces around them have a big impact not only on tenant agencies and customers, but also on neighboring communities. The Good Neighbor and First Impressions programs are based on this core idea. These initiatives provide the framework for GSA to work with communities to create better and more beneficial civic places, and to ensure that they are well-managed and maintained.

BENEFITS TO GSA

A federal public space that is creatively shaped and managed is not only a gift to the community; it can also enhance the performance of a GSA facility. Many an underutilized courthouse entrance court or post office plaza has the potential to contribute directly to the economics of the building and the agency it houses, as well as to customer satisfaction. How is this done? The pages that follow provide guidelines for evaluating and transforming federal spaces into successful civic places that can benefit their communities as well as GSA and its clients. GSA examples are included to illustrate just a few of the myriad solutions that are possible.

A key point is that when GSA collaborates with other community partners to activate and manage a public space under its jurisdiction, it is not just a nice thing to do, a civic obligation, or a political gesture. It is also good business.

Our clients’ first impression often begins with things that GSA may not control. By working closely with local partners on GSA projects—the things that we do control—we build the relationships that will encourage them to address neighborhood conditions.

When held up to GSA’s Public Buildings Service performance measures, it becomes clear how such a project becomes an important contributor to the bottom line. For example, a good civic space can:

- **INCREASE FUNDS FROM OPERATIONS.** Well-used civic spaces that make a positive first impression, whether inside or outside the facility, can increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of a GSA building. These spaces can also generate revenue directly—from leases for food operations and user fees for events, for example.
- **REDUCE VACANT SPACE.** By the same token, if a building’s public spaces are perceived as lively, attractive, and efficient, its vacant interior space will fill up more quickly and the overall vacancy rate drop. In addition, previously unproductive outdoor space can be put to use for concessions, activities, and events on a seasonal basis.
- **INCREASE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION.** Both employees and visitors take pleasure in active and beautiful civic spaces in and around the building where they work and come to transact business. As part of the work environment, an attractive space has been proven to boost productivity, help recruit and retain employees, and vastly improve the public image of the agency that occupies the space as well as that of GSA and the federal government. In addition, a clean, safe and friendly civic space that is actively programmed feels much safer than one that is empty, no matter how many security guards are posted. The reassurance that comes from seeing many other people at ease in public—particularly women and children—greatly improves customer satisfaction with security, and thus satisfaction in general.
- **IMPROVE ON-SCHEDULE AND ON-BUDGET CONSTRUCTION.** Designing or rehabilitating a building with active use of its public space in mind from the outset can

actually lower construction costs. Extensive built forms in a building’s public spaces may not contribute to the usability of that space. Instead, successful public spaces rely on simplicity and flexibility, which allow for a variety of programming, both active and passive uses, and change over time. This approach usually results in lower construction costs. Additionally, if the features that would make a public space easier to program and more attractive to programming partners (e.g. electrical or water lines, flexible seating, etc.) are designed into the initial project, retrofitting the space to accommodate such programming will be unnecessary. Inexpensive initial provisions for these activities can later help a facility attract partner organizations and their resources.

Finally, we know that non-GSA controlled spaces—the neighborhoods around our buildings—play a big role in how our clients and their customers view our facilities. It’s easy to see that their first impression begins with things that GSA may not control. However, by working closely with local partners on GSA projects—the things that we do control—we build the relationships and develop the understanding that will encourage them to address neighborhood conditions. In that way, a completed GSA project can bring value to the site and to our customers that is well beyond project investment alone.

This book is an attempt to pull together some of the best tools and ideas available to help GSA decision makers—property managers, realty specialists, project managers, and others—make the most of GSA projects and properties by maximizing the value of their public spaces. It offers lessons and techniques that can be put to immediate use by any GSA professional working on a project that affects or creates a public space, and demonstrates what has already been achieved.

Public Space Action Points

The Good Neighbor and First Impressions programs have developed the following Action Points to help GSA staff succeed in their challenging new roles and achieve the Public Space Goals discussed previously. Together, the Action Points map out an overall strategy for improving a facility's public spaces, from physical improvements to partnerships with communities to better management practices. They serve as underlying criteria for GSA staff to comprehensively identify opportunities to turn their facilities into great civic places—inside and out.

Adopting the Action Points is seldom easy. In fact, property managers constantly encounter obstacles, from security concerns to less-than-optimal building designs. The following pages illustrate how these common challenges prevent implementation of successful public spaces if left unaddressed.

The rest of this book will explore in-depth how to address challenges specific to your facility by applying the Action Points. Section Two explains how the Action Points can serve as the basis for evaluating your facility's exterior and interior public spaces. Section Three demonstrates how the Action Points can guide you in selecting which improvements to implement. And Section Four provides case studies of actual GSA projects that have embraced the Action Points to achieve wide-ranging success.

SIX PUBLIC SPACE Action Points



ACTION POINT #1

Manage: Evaluate, Program, Maintain



ACTION POINT #2

Design for Use



ACTION POINT #3

Streamline and Integrate Security



ACTION POINT #4

Improve Image and Aesthetics



ACTION POINT #5

Enhance Access and Circulation



ACTION POINT #6

Access Local Resources



ACTION POINT #1

Manage:
Evaluate, Program, Maintain

The best civic places are the ones that people return to time and time again. The only way to achieve this is through management that adapts to the pulse of the place in question. For example, a good manager understands who constitutes the existing and potential users of a particular facility. In terms of maintenance, public space management means becoming so familiar with the patterns of how people use the facility that waste receptacles get emptied at just the right time, horticultural displays change with the seasons, and refreshment kiosks are open when people most want them. By programming and maintaining their facilities' public spaces, good managers create a feeling of comfort and safety—giving people a sense of assurance that someone is in charge. Continual evaluation of how well a building plaza or lobby is serving these users makes it all possible, enabling GSA staff to successfully tailor amenities to meet users' needs and gear events, exhibits, or other programs to the right audience.



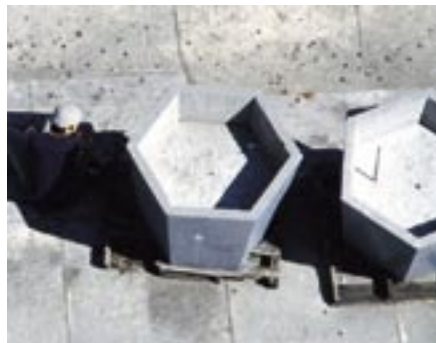
Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse, Martinsburg, WV, before (above) and after (right).



CHALLENGE

Thinking Too Narrowly

Even the best-designed public space will languish if no one supervises or cares for it. This can happen to GSA properties when management responds only to requests and complaints—thereby missing out on the full range of opportunities for improvement—or when it takes the narrow view that the spaces beyond a building's security zone—whether inside or outside—are “not our problem.” However, by not maximizing the public benefit of federal properties, thinking too narrowly does create problems: neglected spaces suffer from poor maintenance and lack the activity necessary to attract public use, making them more vulnerable to crime and decreasing the quality of the neighborhood as a whole. Combat the narrow-focused mentality by remembering that the domain of the property manager extends out to—and in some ways beyond—the property line.



Empty planters, Russell Federal Building, Atlanta, GA.



Planting bed, U.S. Courthouse, Tacoma, WA.



ACTION POINT #2

Design for Use

GSA’s plazas and lobbies should feature amenities and other design elements that make spaces comfortable for people to use. Like a stage set or a well-designed interior, they should provide a backdrop where public use can take place, as well as the basic infrastructure to support this activity. Flexibility is perhaps the biggest factor in functional design. For example, providing the option to sit in the sun or shade can make the difference between people using a place or avoiding it. The placement of amenities is also important: benches or seats that face each other, for instance, should either be close enough for people to talk, or separate to the extent that people don’t feel like they are intruding on someone else’s space.

Seating is not the only important element in designing for use. Infrastructure for games or performances can also create a great magnet for children or a forum for adults to come together. Lighting can highlight these activities, as well as entrances and pathways. Indoor or outdoor retail kiosks introduce a human touch and draw people throughout the day. Whether temporary or permanent, good amenities arranged the right way will establish a convivial setting for social interaction.



Snack bar, William J. Green Federal Building, Philadelphia, PA, before (above) and after (right).



CHALLENGE

Dysfunctional/Inflexible Design

When not well-designed, architectural features may simply punctuate a space or make a “design statement” without actually serving the user. The result is dysfunctional space that actively discourages human activity. The hallmarks of dysfunctional space include: permanent, immovable elements; a space that can only function for one purpose; the lack of any place to sit or congregate; and empty spaces with no focal point. The basic rule of thumb is that people will not use a space that does not offer a good reason to be there. Adding some benches, lawns, or art—however well-intentioned—is not enough if done without thought as to how people will use those elements. By introducing flexible amenities and arranging them to support the desired activity of building tenants and visitors, a dysfunctional space can become a user-friendly place.



Byron Rogers Federal Building Plaza, Denver, CO, before (left) and after (below).





ACTION POINT #3

Streamline and Integrate Security

The way federal buildings are designed and managed to increase security bears enormous significance: Emblems of democracy, they should remain active and open to the public. The challenge for GSA is how to achieve heightened levels of security while providing welcoming public spaces. In an increasing number of cases, GSA properties are secured not by barriers, but by better integrated structural means and careful arrangements for monitoring public access. The design and operation of interior security checkpoints can also be optimized to make the experience of arriving at GSA facilities as efficient and comfortable as possible. By streamlining the process of screening visitors and skillfully integrating security measures into the context of the site, federal buildings can retain the openness befitting democratic institutions.

CHALLENGE

Fortress Mentality

It's unavoidable: safety and security are of paramount concern in these times. But all too often security "solutions" transform a public building into a cold, forbidding place—a veritable fortress. The barriers can be physical, such as ubiquitous concrete Jersey barriers and unrelenting rows of bollards around the property's perimeter, or a matter of logistics, such as a lengthy, intimidating screening process inside the building. Perhaps even more pervasive are the psychological barriers that arise when a building is secured according to the misguided notion that "no people" equals "no problem." The challenge for building managers is to maintain active and open facilities in a time of enhanced vigilance and heightened fear. Washington, D.C.'s Reagan Building (below, bottom right) is a testament to GSA's ability to overcome the fortress mentality: Not only is it one of the country's highest-profile and highest-security federal buildings, but it is also one of the most active, with hundreds of public events held annually.



Disorganized interior security not only is inefficient, but can intimidate first-time visitors with its bulk and lack of logical flow.



Phillip Burton Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse, San Francisco, CA.



A better solution is to provide a welcoming presence through well-integrated security measures, such as the security desk at the Byron Rogers Federal Building in Denver, CO.



Flexible security arrangements enable Washington DC's Reagan Building to hold hundreds of public events annually.



ACTION POINT #4

Improve Image and Aesthetics

Public spaces such as parks and squares play a huge role in shaping the identity of the communities where they are located: Think of the majestic Trevi Fountain in Rome or Philadelphia's famed Rittenhouse Square. Likewise, federal buildings project a strong message to the public about both the surrounding area and the agencies they represent. Every GSA facility constantly shapes people's perceptions of the federal government, from the sidewalk—where the edges of the property send the first signal to the public—to the interior—where visitors interact with tenant agencies. At each step in the sequence, GSA staff should ensure that the purpose of the building is clear; the quality of materials is excellent; and the spaces are free of clutter. Improving the image and aesthetic character of GSA properties is crucial both for facilities to function as community assets and for tenant agencies to fully express their missions.



Wallace F. Bennett Federal Building, Salt Lake City, UT, before (top) and after.



CHALLENGE

Poor Appearance

It's difficult to project a positive image of the federal government when a property's physical appearance is lacking. Outside, the challenge may take the form of blank walls that repel people and discourage pedestrian activity. Inside, it may be a cluttered lobby, poor lighting, or unattractive materials and finishes. Throughout, the mission of tenant agencies may not come across clearly to visitors, because there is no comprehensive signage or information program in place. The good news is that poor appearance is not a permanent affliction. Many GSA properties have overcome aesthetic deficiencies to win design awards and achieve recognition for their improved image.



Edward J. Schwartz Federal Building, San Diego, CA, before (top) and after.





ACTION POINT #5

Enhance Access and Circulation

To be successful, places need to be easy to get to. For a GSA property, this means two things: within the context of the surrounding neighborhood, the property’s exterior public spaces should be easy to access via multiple modes of transportation; and once inside the property line, visitors should be able to easily enter the building and locate their destinations. The first can be accomplished by improving pedestrian and transit connections, the second by improving exterior and interior wayfinding. Making it easier to get to and move within a facility’s public spaces not only improves the visitor experience, but accommodates a greater number of users and enables that facility to take on a more significant public role.



The redesigned lobby of the James A. Byrne U.S. Courthouse, Philadelphia, PA, shown before (top) and after, enhances the visitor experience with improved wayfinding signage and more intuitive circulation.

CHALLENGE

Isolation and Confusion

All sorts of obstacles may prevent people from getting to and around federal properties with ease. At the macro level, facilities may be isolated from the public transit system or surrounded by seas of parking and overly wide streets that are difficult to cross on foot. At the property line, they may be separated from the sidewalk by walls, pedestrian bridges, sunken plazas, garage entrances, guard rails, or steep entryway stairs. Moving inside, the entrance may be hard to identify or intimidating to use. Once in the building, inadequate wayfinding signs may confuse visitors on their way to conduct business with tenant agencies. Meeting the full breadth of this challenge requires both large-scale infrastructure improvements to integrate the facility into its urban context, and detail-oriented changes to improve users’ understanding of how to reach their destinations.



The setback of the Salt Lake City Public Library (above) necessitates an awkward access ramp.

The pedestrian-friendly streets and sidewalks at the Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon (bottom) improve the building’s openness and approachability.



ACTION POINT #6

Access Local Resources

Partnerships enable GSA staff to greatly multiply their efforts to improve public spaces. Some GSA properties have developed productive partnerships with museums, transit agencies, public works departments, and downtown associations, among others. By accessing these local resources, GSA staff have introduced new programs to their exterior and interior public spaces, enhanced neighborhood safety, improved transit stops, and created more walkable and attractive streets. These partnerships make GSA properties better public spaces, achieve change beyond the property line, and establish GSA as a good neighbor.



John C. Kluczynski Federal Building, Chicago, IL, before the weekly farmers market (top) and during.

CHALLENGE

Going It Alone

Engaging partners outside the federal government can be intimidating. GSA staff may be reluctant to reach out to local governments or other agencies because past projects have strained relationships. The desire to go it alone, however, bears very negative consequences for GSA properties. By not collaborating with local authorities on infrastructure improvements or working with neighborhood groups to host programs and events, property managers risk turning federal buildings into islands without connection to surrounding communities. Relationships with local agencies will only deteriorate in this scenario. In fact, communicating with local agencies as early and often as possible on issues of mutual interest is the best way to build healthy partnerships and maximize GSA's positive impact in the communities where we operate.



Employees of the Business Improvement District in Phoenix, AZ, review a map of downtown with GSA's building manager.

