

METROPOLIS

MAG.COM

SUBSCRIBE | MAGAZINE | AD INFO | PRODUCT INFO | CONTACT US

SUSTAINABLE METROPOLIS | URBAN JOURNAL | LIVE@METROPOLIS | NEXT GENERATION | DESIGNMART | EVENTS | TROPICAL GREEN

METROPOLIS

10 Sassy Collaborations

THE COEN BROTHERS AND SCHINDLER AND THE NEW YORK PITTSBURGH THEATERS OF THEATRE MILWAUKEE ART CENTER AND NEWTON COLLAGE PRESERVATION & LIVING CENTER

DESIGN CLIENTS

THE POWER BEHIND THE PROJECTS

HAIL TO THE CHIEF

By Karen E. Steen  
January 2002

Architect Alex Washburn remembers the day in early 1994 when, as a new legislative aide to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, he was pursuing a reform bill that would have monitored the design quality of federal buildings: "I started doing all the due diligence you do in getting legislation together. And then I got a call from this very excitabile person. He was calling from the GSA, and his name was Ed Feiner."

Feiner, chief architect of the General Services Administration (GSA), the real estate arm of the federal government, was against the legislation. Washburn, curious to learn why, agreed to a meeting. "As soon as you meet him you understand what an energetic and creative person he is," Washburn says. "He showed me that what was needed was not some piece of legislation forming a commission but one incredibly dedicated person who had figured out the system from the inside--and he had done that."

Offsite:

The General Service Administration can be reached at [www.gsa.gov](http://www.gsa.gov). The Design Excellence Program's site is [hdra.gsa.gov/pbs/pg/design\\_excell/index.htm](http://hdra.gsa.gov/pbs/pg/design_excell/index.htm). The U.S. Green Buildings Council LEED program information can be seen at [www.usgbc.org/programs/leed.htm](http://www.usgbc.org/programs/leed.htm).

ED FEINER

CHIEF ARCHITECT OF THE GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

COLLABORATOR:  
RICHARD MEIER  
THOM MAYNE  
CAROL ROSS BARNEY  
ARQUITECTONICA  
MOSHE SAFDIE

e-newsletter

sign up for our free bi-weekly newsletter!

When he applied to work at the GSA in 1980, Feiner was the only applicant to submit a portfolio. He got the job--and a mandate from his boss to change the direction of federal architecture. The Design Excellence Program Feiner has since created is well documented as a dramatic shift in both the way the agency selects architects and the kind of buildings it gets in return.

The way it came about is a lesson in good clientship. When the agency's design awards kept going only to historic-preservation projects, Feiner and Design Excellence director Marilyn Farley asked architects what the GSA could be doing to create *new* award-winning buildings. ("I said, 'We can't keep giving awards to Cass Gilbert,'" Feiner recalls. "'He's been dead for God knows how many years!'"") The resulting suggestions--from architects such as Hugh Hardy, Gene Kohn, and Margaret McCurry--became the Design Excellence Program. With a streamlined process that allows architects to submit portfolios rather than many-paged applications for projects, the GSA attracted younger, smaller, more experimental firms. Feiner likes to point out that he has just contracted the country's first federal building by a woman (Carol Ross Barney's Oklahoma City federal complex) and the first federal courthouse by an African American (the Matthew J. Perry courthouse, in Columbia, South Carolina, by Ralph Jackson).

Ross Barney praises Feiner: "He's approachable--a very ordinary guy--but he's also a savvy politician." Though GSA commissions can fall through (her design for a courthouse in Cape Gerardo, Missouri, for example, was killed by a conservative representative), Ross Barney says Feiner's fantastic qualities keep her coming back. "He keeps trying to find the path we can go down," she says. "Sometimes you have clients who support you so far and then abandon you, and you become the target. He doesn't do that."



**FEDERAL BUILDING  
SAN FRANCISCO, CA**  
The narrowness of Thom Mayne's design (2005; above) allows natural light to fill the interiors.



**FEDERAL COURTHOUSE  
LOS ANGELES, CA**  
Ralph Johnson's courthouse (2000; above), updates the four icons of traditional American courthouse design: the portal, the column, the rotunda, and the cupola.



# HAIL TO THE CHIEF

Page 2

Feiner is not a client in the typical sense: he's also a representative. His most important constituents may be the judges who work in the buildings--and whose conservative tastes often clash with those of cutting-edge architects. "The whole judiciary is based on precedent--and in buildings, precedent has been Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian," Feiner says. How does he convince the judges to embrace designs by Thom Mayne and Arquitectonica? "It takes a certain amount of sincerity that you really are interested in them accomplishing their mission and their tasks," he says, "and that our idea is not just to do good-looking buildings but to make it easier for their employees to perform their jobs." But Feiner insists that he welcomes the dissent. "If the client is a vacuum, you're not going to get great architecture, you're just going to get whatever you want to do," he says. "Great architecture requires debate and challenge. Think about Michelangelo and Pope Julius--they didn't get along all that well!" In the end, Feiner says, the judges come to appreciate their buildings: "They see that these are buildings that represent not Greek or Roman ideals but *American* ideals. That is truly the breakthrough--we are using American statements and iconography for the first time."

To reach such goals, designers can't rest on their avant-garde cred. "I like to tell architects that they get one opportunity to make their lasting presence on the landscape of this country," Feiner says. "They have to put in place something that will be of enduring quality and value to the American people. It's a much tougher job than commercial architecture." One of Feiner's greatest honors was when the Sandra Day O'Connor Courthouse, in Phoenix, Arizona, won an award from *Progressive Architecture* magazine in 1996. "They said Richard Meier was able to depart from his predictable architecture and experiment with new approaches," Feiner recalls proudly. So the architects are not only influencing the GSA, but the agency is pushing already notable architects to even greater heights. How? "We give real guilt trips--and I'm an expert," Feiner laughs. "When you tell someone, 'You know, this building is not going to represent you, this building is going to represent the American system--the American culture--for generations to come,' that's asking a lot."

The work also asks a lot of the GSA. "I often envy Michael Eisner and other world-renowned clients," he says. "They have flexibility. Every decision we make is looked upon as precedent-setting." It's a responsibility the agency takes seriously. For example, Feiner says all GSA projects after 2002 will rate at least silver on the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED scale of sustainability. Sustainable projects by Mayne and Moshe Safdie will include features such as grass roofing, operable windows, and natural ventilation.

This degree of responsibility is another of the GSA's good-client qualities. The agency's First Impressions program tries to correct problems with many existing midcentury federal buildings. Its latest challenge is immense: humanizing the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building, in New York, and making it a "good neighbor." Meanwhile the GSA also attempts to contextualize new buildings and make sure they serve their communities well. At a new federal building in Miami, Arquitectonica is working with the Miami Botanical Garden to create an arboretum that will be both a security setback and an amenity for the neighborhood. And Ross Barney's design for a new federal complex in Oklahoma City shows support for a community



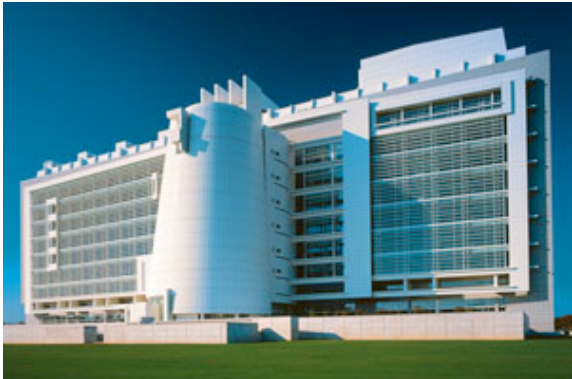
FEDERAL CAMPUS  
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK  
Carol Ross Barney's campus (2002; above) includes a park that provides both a public space and a security buffer.



ARIEL RIOS FEDERAL BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, D.C.  
The restoration of the Ariel Rios Federal Building (above) was typical of 1990s GSA successes.



LLOYD D. GEORGE  
UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE  
LAS VEGAS, NV  
Cannon-Dworsky's courthouse (2000; above) aims to be a truly civic space by welcoming the public onto the plaza.



UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE

devastated by the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. "If anything demonstrates that we're going to survive, this does," Feiner says. "It is truly a commitment building. It would have been much easier just to lease space. But a federal building was destroyed, and a federal building will be rebuilt."

Ross Barney feels the importance of the project is the message that design can solve problems. To pursue such ideals, she says, architects have two choices: "You work for some independent person who's got a lot of money--you're really playing with someone else's toys--or you find a client who is equally dedicated to making the world better. That's Ed. He really believes good buildings and good environments can make things better. When you have a client like that, you can accomplish almost anything."

AND FEDERAL BUILDING  
CENTRAL ISLIP, NY

Richard Meier's federal building (2000; above) in Central Islip, New York, conveys the importance of what goes on inside.



SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR  
UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE  
PHOENIX, AZ

His courthouse (2000; above), in Phoenix, Arizona, features a grand modern civic hall: the main atrium, which is 350 feet long by 150 feet wide, is cooled by evaporation and convection. Both won GSA design awards in 2000.

[PREVIOUS](#) | [PAGE 1](#) [2](#)

[MASTHEAD](#) | [SUBMISSIONS](#) | [AWARDS](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#) | [TERMS OF USE](#)

[↑](#) [BACK TO TOP](#)