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Three years after 9/11, security mindset threatens civic design

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After the loss of nearly 3,000 lives at the World Trade Center three years ago, no one doubts that large risks have come to American soil, or that government agencies must do something about them. But some designers believe the remedies that security experts have recommended — and that the federal government has adopted — threaten to harm the public realm through undue isolation of public buildings.

A reaction against the excesses of the federal security regimen is starting to form. One of its chief exponents is David Dixon, principal in charge of planning and urban design at Goody, Clancy & Associates in Boston. “The war against terrorism threatens to become a war against the livability of American cities,” says Dixon. “In the rush to respond to the threat of terrorism,” says Dixon, “a loose network of public officials, architects, developers, engineers, lawyers, planners, security consultants, and others who influence building codes [is] creating a new generation of planning and design regulations.”

Concerns of urban designers center on instructions similar to the series below, which has been applied to buildings such as federal courthouses:

- Set the building 50 or more feet back from the street.
- Sharply limit the number of



in Richmond, above, is subtly protected by low walls and setbacks. Two ends of the building conform to the streetwall. Courtesy of Robert A.M. Stern Architects.

Courthouse

Public areas will also be designed to withstand blasts. “Glazing up to 16 feet above grade will be both ballistically and blast rated,” according to Stern’s office. A barrier wall masked as a planter bed will extend around the site, to deter vehicles. Even with all those precautions, curbside parking, which is both a convenience for visitors and a useful buffer for pedestrians on the sidewalks, will be eliminated on all sides of the building. The project, on which HLM Design of Bethesda, Maryland, is associate architect, is scheduled for completion in 2006. Meanwhile, it’s fair to ask, what is the likelihood that Al Qaeda or a homegrown extremist would attack a courthouse in Richmond? Privately, some federal officials wonder whether it makes sense to spend so much money fortifying buildings when the risk is impossible to calculate.

Chiple, at PBS&J, said there is currently a move toward a method in which the client and the designer identify a building’s potential vulnerabilities and then select the appropriate level of protection. Theoretically, this encourages a flexible approach. “The problem,” Chiple acknowledges, “has been that everybody has gone to the worst-case scenario. The approach has been that you maximize the standoff distance.”

Bureaucratic caution has aggravated the tendency toward anti-urban decisions. Christine Saum, director of urban design and plan review for the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), which exercises limited authority over federal building projects in the Washington region, notes that there are no regulations specifically prohibiting ground-floor retail in federal buildings. However, when that kind of use is proposed, “often the people from the Federal Protective Service [in Homeland Security] are uncomfortable with it,” Saum says. Mixed-use is not formally banned, she says.

entrances.

- Eliminate many first-floor windows.
- Eliminate parking on streets adjacent to the building.
- Stop constructing parking underneath.
- Install barriers to prevent vehicles potentially carrying bombs from entering the site.

Ever since a truck bomb shattered the nine-story Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing 167 people, the federal response has been to make government buildings harder to attack. At first, this strategy seemed uncontroversial. Occupants of federal buildings deserved protection from antigovernment extremists like Timothy McVeigh. But after Al Qaeda brought down the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon, it became clear that the security program would be more far-reaching. Any building or space possessing symbolic value may now be viewed as a potential terrorist target. Defensiveness might intrude on the character not only of federal buildings but also of statehouses, city halls, universities, museums, historic monuments, churches — the list is endless.

GROWING AWARENESS

Some security specialists are coming around to the idea that buildings, or at least their perimeter barrier systems, should avoid creating a harsh impression. Michael Chipley, program manager for Homeland Security and geospatial solutions at the civil engineering firm PBS&J, says that in the last year and a half, a number of officials and professionals, including urban planners, landscape architects, engineers, architects, and law enforcement personnel, have started “trying to eliminate the ugly Jersey-barrier mentality.” Chipley, co-author of Federal Emergency Management Agency Report 426, Reference Manual to Mitigate

“They just don’t like it.” On the positive side, NCPD spokesman Denise Liebowitz points out that the federal response is not yet fixed or unchangeable. “These regulations and standards are still evolving in response to risk assessments,” she says.

AFFECTING THE PRIVATE SECTOR

It’s inevitable that security requirements will affect structures other than government buildings. GSA, in addition to owning 1,700 buildings containing 182 million square feet, leases 153 million square feet in 6,200 privately owned buildings, according to Alderson. As leases come up for renewal, many of those buildings are required to meet the setback requirement or to be “hardened” for a degree of protection from blasts. Hardening, which may include new window assemblies and other alterations, is costly.

“It’s almost always cheaper to find a new site and building,” says Alderson. “There was a real concern that the government would be leaving the cities.” The exodus has not occurred, she points out. Still, designs like a new privately owned office building in Washington’s Southeast Federal Center for lease to the federal Transportation Department, augur poorly for the future, with their 50-foot setbacks and their scarcity of street-level non-office uses. “You create a lot of dead space,” says Elizabeth Miller, senior urban planner and designer for NCPD. In some instances, setbacks may be visually appealing, as they’ve been for American courthouse squares for two centuries or more. Security-consciousness “may return government to the idea of the monument on the hill — a rather more lofty-looking building,” Alderson says. Rob Goodill, a partner at Torti Gallas & Partners in Silver Spring, Maryland, has suggested developing patios, plazas, walls, gardens, and other elements that allow a building to be distant from the street and yet occupy its site gracefully.

Rob Rogers, a partner in Rogers Marvel Architects in New York, offers a standard for judging a security installation: It’s not worthwhile “unless it provides an amenity or access or other benefits” in addition to providing protection. “To spend a lot of money and get nothing but bollards is a fool’s errand,” Rogers says. “Most of the tested [security] elements are simply inappropriate for an urban environment. They’ve been developed for overseas, for embassies, the Third World, etcetera.”

Rogers says more imaginative approaches are

Potential Terrorist Attacks Against Buildings, says "A tremendous amount of philosophical change is out there."

The change is reflected in a "kit of parts" perimeter vehicle barrier system that the General Services Administration (see sidebar for detailed description). When installed, it will create a more formal street edge and "more clearly define the pedestrian right of way," Caroline R. Alderson of GSA and Sharon C. Park of US Heritage Preservation Services write in *Building Security*, a new book edited by Barbara A. Nadel (see review on Page 15). Alderson and Park expect the kit to generate a "comfortable sense of path enclosure" and a relief from the great width of street.

Yet designers such as Dixon — whose criticism of federal security planning appears in *First to Arrive: The State and Local Responses to Terrorism*, an MIT Press book edited by Juliette N. Kayyem and Robyn L. Pangi — remain disturbed by the siting requirements of government buildings, the relegation of parking to open lots or above-ground garages, and the resistance to incorporating retail and other uses into the buildings' ground-floor perimeter. The John Joseph Moakley US Courthouse, which opened in 1998 on the Boston waterfront, reflecting post-Oklahoma City thinking, "lines the key pedestrian connection from downtown to the new Seaport district with 400 feet of essentially blank walls," Dixon points out. If the courthouse had been designed after September 2001, the results, he says, could have been even worse: "a barrier between downtown and the Seaport."

New urbanist firms are struggling with how to meet the security mandates and yet make the surroundings comfortable for pedestrians. When Robert A.M. Stern Architects was prohibited from having a future federal

needed. Instead of a conventional barrier, his firm is designing what he describes as "a luminous glass bench that will light a pedestrian path from the Ferry Terminal on the Hudson to the World Trade Center site." It will provide seating, subtly glowing illumination, and presumably aesthetic delight, all while keeping vehicular threats at bay. It will be lower than a typical barrier because in front of the bench will be a compressible fill material that will support people but will cause a vehicle to sink down. Such innovations seem to be rare.

David Dixon believes the currently dominant approach to security is wrongheaded. "It is perhaps the greatest irony," Dixon says, "that in recent decades much of our urban environment was rescued from fear — and cities and society were made far safer — by the conscious creation of more open buildings, the blurring of the separation of public and private space, promotion of community, and drawing of people back to our streets and square. A single-minded focus on defending against terrorism," he says, "threatens all of these hard-won gains."

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courthouse in Richmond, Virginia, fill most of its block, the firm arrived at a compromise. The two principal sides of the courthouse will be long curves that will provide the required 50-foot standoff from the streets.

Two end-walls, however, will come within 20 feet of the curb, thus fitting into the street grid of Richmond's Capitol district.

Portions of the building situated less than 50 feet from the street will contain "redundant structure" capable of taking the brunt of a bomb without collapsing, according to Grant Marani, partner in charge of the project for Stern's office.