

United States Federal Courthouse, Boston, Mass

Like the law itself, the United States Courthouse is simultaneously formal and welcoming, detached and connected, and historical and contemporary. The innovation in the design of the courthouse is the synthesis of powerful ideas about citizenship and law into a grand public building that *shapes* a critical moment in Boston's urban fabric, rather than merely occupying the site.

The new United States Courthouse on Fan Pier serves as headquarters for the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit and the United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts. The building houses two Courtrooms for the Court of Appeals and 25 Courtrooms for the District Court, as well as 40 judges' chambers, a Circuit law library, the office of a United States Congressman, offices for the United States Attorney, extensive support facilities for the United States Marshals service and Pre-Trial and Probation services, and a day-care facility for the children of employees. The 765,000-square-foot building, clad in water-struck brick with granite trim, has ten floors above grade and one below.

Materiality

The predominant surface material of the Courthouse, for both exterior walls and the walls of interior public circulation spaces, is water-struck brick laid up in American bond with sixth-course headers. Deer Island granite (like the brick, of New England origin) is employed as trim in string courses, lintels, sills and bases. The choice of brick was motivated by several factors: durability, economy, contextual appropriateness, and finally, the capacity of fine brickwork to bespeak the same respect for tradition and craft that characterizes the operations of the federal judiciary.

Complementing and contrasting with the prevailing palette of brick trimmed with granite is the altogether unprecedented steel structure supporting the aluminum-and-glass conoid that shapes the building's Harborpark frontage. This innovative structure, 312 feet long and 88 feet high, is composed of a welded grid of 10-inch deep standard steel sections interconnected with a diagonal net of pre-stressed stainless steel rods. In its material as in its formal character, this assembly connotes the openness and responsiveness of the federal courts to the need for adjudication of ever-new conflicts arising within the society they serve.

External posture

The Courthouse adopts two distinctly different postures toward its surroundings. On each of its street sides the building aims to *fit in* by presenting to its neighbors a richly-fenestrated masonry street-wall that respects and reinforces the pre-established character of the Fort Point Channel district. Conversely, on the water side, the building aims to *stand out* by making the entrances to all 27 courtrooms visible from the city and harbor through an emblematically shaped metal-and-glass wall — the conoid. The open and engaging form of this transparent surface, in combination with the inwardly focused cylindrical cupola rising behind it, proclaims the special status of the federal judiciary as an institution that is at once a *part* of and *apart from* the community it serves.

At ground level, more than half of the 4.5-acre Courthouse site is dedicated to public open space. Along Old Northern Avenue, a broad brick-paved sidewalk is shaded by trees planted in a cobblestone border. Park benches grouped in pairs within this border invite casual socializing while offering opportunities to contemplate inscriptions carved in granite panels set into the building's street-wall. Along Courthouse Way, around the corner from the main entrance, a low planting bed shapes four semicircular granite seating areas, each shaded by a tree at its center. At the opposite end of the Old Northern Avenue frontage, a large arch, similar to that at the main entrance, opens into a two-story high arcaded loggia, celebrating the building's waterfront setting and inviting access to the Harborpark beyond. On the water side of this loggia, a broad brick-paved promenade, commencing at the Old Northern Avenue Bridgehead, stretches along the entire 850-foot-long waterfront of the Fan Pier site, affording panoramic views of downtown Boston and its Harbor. Along the outer edge of this promenade a low granite wall, punctuated by steps leading down to a cobblestone quay, offers ample seating close to the water's edge and to the floating dock and fender piles at which ships will from time to time be berthed. Large cast iron bollards, ornamental light standards and teakwood benches complete the furnishing of this important extension of the city's Harborwalk system.

The Harborpark, a green space landscaped with trees and plants indigenous to the New England seashore, consists of two interconnected parts, one casual and the other more formal in character. At the eastern end of the site, where Fan Pier reaches out into Boston Harbor, gently curved paths passing through a lawn bordered by groups of trees and shrubs, both deciduous and evergreen, lead to a raised overlook that is readily accessible yet tranquilly removed from the hubbub of city life. Closer in, and embraced by the conoid, is the Courthouse Lawn, circular in plan and framed by brick-paved paths leading from the waterfront promenade to a glazed Entry Pavilion that provides direct access from the Park to the Courthouse. By virtue of its emblematic form and privileged position, the Lawn is the symbolic center of both Courthouse and Harborpark — a public space celebrating equally the federal courts and the city they serve.

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