2011 ASLA Design Awards

Denver Justice Center Campus
Honor Award
studioINSITE, LLC

Design over $500,000 Construction Budget
Submitting for:
Category 1A: Design (Over $500,000 construction budget)

Project Name:
Denver Justice Center Campus

Project Location:
Denver, Colorado

Project Summary:
The Denver Justice Center campus is a unique project situated on a former newspaper site along the civic core in downtown Denver that includes a new Courthouse, Detention Center and Post Office/Parking Garage designed by a team of international and local architects. A critical component of the campus is the “4th room,” referring to the distinctive Tooley Plaza located between the Courthouse and Detention Center. The plaza was designed to support the needs of employees, judges, detainees and visitors, as well as provide a welcoming environment for citizens of neighboring communities who pass through and enjoy the plaza on their way to and from Downtown Denver. The plaza hosts detailed paving patterns and decorative ground plane lighting, landscaped seating areas, security bollards and granite seat walls, a café patio and an iconic and memorable art structure “The Light Chamber,” designed by the late Dennis Oppenheim. Combined with massive private and public investment in Denver’s downtown, the Denver Justice Center Campus sets a precedent for the City as a national model for a successful aesthetic with a visionary redevelopment plan.

Purpose of Project:

- Requirements
  o The planning of the Denver Justice Center Campus required the integration of surrounding neighborhoods and converging axes within the city vision and design plan.
  o This redevelopment plan meets the extensive programmatic needs of each individual facility (Courthouse, Detention Center and Post Office Parking Garage) within a shared site.
  o Extensive public safety and building defense considerations had to be made and integrated within the site design, while providing an inviting civic plaza for all users.

- Scope
  o The establishment of a development framework plan which envisions the potential of a future civic mall extending eleven blocks from the Colorado State Capitol at the eastern edge, through Civic Center Park to Speer Boulevard to the west.
  o The master-planning, urban design, LEED gold & platinum site design fulfillment, green roof plan reviews and public/private community involvement.
  o All hardscape and softscape design and technical documentation surrounding and between buildings.

- Philosophy
  o The Denver Justice Center Civic Plaza is a place for community engagement: illustrating the concepts of dignity, compassion and truth within a shared civic space. The plaza sits within a larger context of the Civic Mall, which stitches together adjacent communities with careful consideration for employees, detainees, visitors, residents and passersby.

- Intent
  o The plaza has been designed to be simple, disciplined, and civic in both alignment and nature, enforcing a grand gesture while inviting visitors in on a pedestrian level. The main plaza is a formal space with a strict structure that locates the main entrances to both buildings while maintaining a subtle and aesthetically pleasing sense of security. Opening to the Silver Triangle, tree allees enforce the surrounding street grid and provide a measured landscape and canopy. The order of the spaces reflects an epic character with the careful consideration of visual and experiential perception between buildings. The final design has succeeded as a gateway to downtown via Tremont and the marker of a civic mall to the west toward Speer Boulevard.
**Construction Budget:**

Total construction budget was $325 million, site design budget was $5 million

**Role of Landscape Architect vs. Other Participants:**

The Landscape Architect teamed closely with the project architect in a highly collaborative design process with the Office of the Mayor, Denver City Council and the surrounding neighborhood associations. The planning process also required an extensive Development Plan and coordination with City Engineering to define the public street that bisects the Courthouse and Detention Center site. The Landscape Architect was responsible for both the large-scale Civic Mall Framework Plan and the design of the Justice Center Civic Plaza. As the sole designer for the site, the landscape architect linked two distinct buildings from two different architects in a single civic plaza. The Landscape Architect also coordinated many public meetings and collected feedback from hundreds of stakeholders. The Landscape Architect was heavily involved in the Denver Justice Center project from start to finish, and remains in close contact with the client and the community.

"I have found [the landscape architect] to be consistently responsive to the needs of the City. They have worked through contentious issues in a spirit of collaboration resulting in mutually satisfying outcomes. They are a key piece to holding the entire Justice Center project together."

James Mejia, Former Policy Manager, Denver Justice Center, 720.865.2670

**Special Factors: (project’s uniqueness, any other problems)**

- The differing design characteristics of the two buildings presented a significant design challenge, as their distinct visual concepts were ultimately unified by the central Tooley plaza design.
- The signature architect of one of the site buildings abruptly left the project; the landscape architect played a critical role for the client in ensuring the original design concept was carried through.
- The Landscape Architect worked directly with the City and County of Denver Forestry and Parks & Recreation departments to establish a new paradigm for urban forestry.
- Implemented new approach to bioswale water retention and stormwater treatment for the building scale.
- Developed a signature xeri-landscape for public display.
- The project’s connection with the community was of utmost importance to the client and design team, and the continued communication and coordination with the surrounding neighborhoods presented many distinct opinions and opposing ideas that had to be moderated and consensus achieved by the designers.
- The deployment of a highly sophisticated site and building security defense system, including ram-resistant bollards, blast-resistant planter walls, stand-off distances, security lighting and video camera accessibility. The challenge involved the successful integration of all of these elements in an aesthetic design approach, but directing attention to the unifying design features and placemaking components.
- The monumental work of art by renowned sculptor Dennis Oppenheim has been carefully integrated into the site, despite major space challenges. The sculpture’s shape, location and the unique paving pattern were all coordinated by the landscape architect who remained a close collaborator with the artist throughout the entire design process.

**Significance:**

- The plaza is layered with a hierarchy and sequence of space from large to small. With defined areas that form “outdoor rooms,” the landscape architect has provided the public with a new urban experience as they move through these spaces. The monumental design features, integration of public art and connections with adjacent neighborhoods all affect the way in which this space is viewed and the site program is understood. The honest and utilitarian design aesthetic also provides a subtle, yet effective sense of security with urban design elements that remain visually pleasing. The final result is an impressive and enlightening public space that elevates the urban fabric of downtown Denver to a national scale.