



## PRESERVATION OUTLEASING SUCCESS STORY

### Preserving an Art Moderne Masterpiece: U.S. Courthouse

Los Angeles, California

#### THE PROJECT

Monumental in scale and concept, the U.S. Courthouse on North Spring Street occupies a double-sized urban block site in downtown Los Angeles and forms an integral part of the Los Angeles Civic Center, along with Los Angeles City Hall and the Hall of Justice. When completed in 1940, the 17-story edifice was the largest federal building in the western U.S., signaling a strong and stable governmental presence during a time of uncertainty. Designed by Gilbert Stanley Underwood in the Art Moderne Style, the granite-clad exterior conveys a sense of composed dignity via symmetrical, stepped rectangular massing; a restrained use of ornamentation; and window openings arranged to resemble vertical ribbons. The interior lobbies retain their original polychrome terrazzo floors, ornamental plaster ceilings, marble walls, statuary, painted murals, and ornate aluminum fixtures.

The U.S. Courthouse's Courtroom No. 8 is nationally significant as the venue for the court case, *Méndez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al.* (1946), a lawsuit filed by five Hispanic families whose children were denied admission to public schools in southern California. The court heard the first federal challenge to the doctrine of "separate but equal." The decision determined that separate was, in fact, not equal. The U.S. Courthouse was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2006 and designated a National Historic Landmark in 2012.

#### THE PROCESS

The relocation of the U.S. District Courts to a new courthouse in 2016 left vacant interior space. This threatened the economic viability and continued federal ownership of the U.S. Courthouse building. The building had substantial capital investment needs at a level that was "non-competitive" within the context of nationwide funding levels. Rather than an adaptive use approach, which often leads to substantial alteration of courtroom interiors to accommodate a new use, the U.S. General Services Administration's (GSA) rehabilitation strategy focused on

“Los Angeles County Superior Court at the Spring Street Federal Building is a great example of utilizing historic underutilized federal space for their unique needs while reinvesting in preservation. Nearly three years into this lease, taxpayer savings continue to be realized.”

—Tom Scott, GSA Regional Administrator, Pacific Rim Region

The monumental U.S. Courthouse forms an integral part of the Los Angeles Civic Center, along with Los Angeles City Hall and the Hall of Justice. (Carol M. Highsmith Photography, Inc./GSA)



finding a compatible tenant as an interim solution. GSA's goal was to retain original interior configurations, significant fixtures, and finishes of all the historic courtrooms, particularly Courtroom No. 8, as designed by Underwood.

As part of an approach centered on the efficient use of federal real estate assets, GSA entered into a 10-year lease agreement—also known as an outlease—with the Judicial Council of California of floors 1, 2, 8, and 9 for use by the Los Angeles Superior Courts. The remainder of the building is occupied by the U.S. Attorney's Office and the U.S. Marshals Service.

## THE SUCCESS

This collaboration between federal, state, and local governments in the public interest allows for the preservation of all 16 historic courtroom interiors by continuing their original use. The use of Section 111 of the National Historic Preservation Act keeps the building in public use while GSA works to develop a long-term strategy for reinvestment and use of the building, which will require significant appropriations to address its occupancy and capital investment needs to maintain it as a viable federal asset.

*Left*, when completed in 1940, the 17-story edifice was the largest federal building in the western U.S. (Carol M. Highsmith Photography, Inc./GSA); *Right*, the U.S. Courthouse's Courtroom No. 8 is nationally significant as the venue of the first federal challenge to the doctrine of "separate but equal." (Carol M. Highsmith Photography, Inc./GSA)

### Partners:

U.S. General Services Administration

California State Historic Preservation Office

Development One, Inc.

Judicial Council of California

Los Angeles County Superior Court

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