
This illustrated look at California courthouses is as entertaining as it is educational. The examination of this quintessential building type through extensive photographs, fluid text, and anecdotal sidelines expertly captures the formative history and development of courthouses throughout California.

An introduction to these significant public buildings is presented through insightful perspectives on law, history, and architecture. Additional insight includes essays on the rehabilitation aspects of maintaining historic courthouses and a look forward to the development of future courthouses. An annotated state map provides a handy reference for the heart of the book: a regional grouping of counties with a chapter devoted to each county and a lively discourse on its courthouses. The history of individual courthouses is examined as the book focuses on intimate details of the development of each county and its politics. With early communities few and far between, each county developed in its own unique way, with its approach to law and order and the establishment of a government seat being no different. Towns also fought, or as in the case of Santa Rosa swiped the county records in the middle of the night, to lay claim to the right to be a county seat, a title that bestowed increased property values, populations, and invariably in the early days, taverns.

Often the only central meeting place besides churches, courthouses were frequently the most interesting and important building in the county and most prominently located within the downtown area. Aside from their government functions, they became the center of important civic, religious, cultural, social, and community activities.

Beginning in the 1900s, courthouses on a statewide basis became vehicles for expressing a variety of ideas, including political reform, the new world stature of the United States, and aspirations for urban, architectural, and social order. A county courthouse along with a fire-proof hall of records, the ubiquitous Carnegie Library, and perhaps a U.S. Post Office reflected a community’s interpretation of its place in a larger society.

Evolving architectural styles, fire resistant materials, and new structural systems allowed courthouses to enlarge in size. Interior design also evolved, from the standard three bay plan built through the early 1900s into a cruciform plan with a centralized space that became a standard feature. Courthouses also became monumental in appearance and for the first time accommodated sizable public ceremonial interiors. As styles evolved, domes with exotic interpretations appeared; Richardsonian Romanesque style courthouses loomed over southern California, the City Beautiful movement introduced Beaux Arts Classicism, and a remarkable Spanish Colonial Revival style courthouse in Santa Barbara made the headlines. Its dramatic departure from the courthouses of the day made the July 1929 *Architect and Engineer* with M. Maclean Finny contrasting it with other courthouses: “Who can muster any enthusiasm about just another public office building? . . . But I had not then seen the Courthouse at Santa Barbara. How refreshingly different!”
The Depression brought federally funded WPA Moderne style courthouses which transitioned into Modernism. By the late 1950s, the renewed availability of building materials was evident in an International Style period and heralded a movement of government centers to the suburbs. With old locations deemed too crowded, the decline of public transportation, and a need to provide larger parking facilities, the move seemed logical at the time; after all, main street stores were all moving to malls on the outskirts of town too.

We are fortunate that the invention of photography roughly coincides with California’s admission to the United States, making it possible to assemble this visual history of courthouses. The only unfortunate side of the book may be that all of the photographs are in black and white, a result of archival and historic photographic sources. Luckily these sources provide documentation of what has been lost as a result of fire or earthquake, or in the name of progress through hasty and uninformed but determined bureaucratic decisions to drastically remodel or demolish old courthouses. (Save the Cooper House!)

We have come a long way since the State Legislature created the first 27 counties six months before California was admitted to the Union in September 1850. Today, courthouses have been constructed in each of the 58 counties and during each of the 15 decades since the State was created. However it is unlikely that many contemporary courthouses or replacements for original courthouses will ever be significant enough to match this excellent account of the historic Courthouses of California.

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