

Creating the Photographic Record: The United States Court House Project

by RICHARD PARE

INTRODUCTION by PHYLLIS LAMBERT

The court house project evolved from the work in Montreal described in the previous article, and out of a photographic collection I was forming which focussed on the photographer and the city for new offices of Joseph E. Seagram and Sons in New York City. As Director of Planning for construction of the Seagram Building from 1954 to 1958, I had been responsible both for construction of the building and for the installation of the Seagram offices. The first collection which I had formed for the company in the late 1950s consisted of paintings, prints and tapestries. At that time national pride in the new school of American painters was at its height. Some fifteen years later, however, when the disintegration of the city was an all too evident and frightening prospect, it seemed important to show to people who lived and worked there the views of those who had looked carefully at the city. My concern was to provoke a consciousness of the environment and pleasure in the great variety of details and forms of the city in order to develop an awareness of some of the different ways in which they could be seen. Under the direction of the Art Lending Service and the Department of Photography of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, we began a collection of photographs of American cities ranging from the work of the acknowledged twentieth-century masters to that of many young people working today.

I felt that we should also undertake a specific project in which photographers would elucidate specific aspects of the city. The problem was to define the subject. Aware of how long it was taking to cover the many aspects of the city revealed by the work in Montreal, I had suggested to a friend there that he begin to document a single building type, the fire station. In this way, the subject was defined and encompassable. The function is a constant; therefore, various buildings constructed at different times and places provide an incisive view of changing architectural values which are, of course, an expression of changes in the values of society.

A specific occasion is generative, and the Bicentennial celebration of the United States provided a focus for undertaking a photodocumentation project. In August 1974 I renewed discussion of such a project with John Szarkowski, director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art. I put forward the idea of documenting the county court house, first suggested by a friend's enthusiasm for the court houses in her native state. As we talked of various possibilities, I became convinced of the need for the documentation of a specific building type across the United States. Since the beginning of the Montreal project, I had also grown aware of the need to instill a respect for older buildings. I called Richard Pare in Chicago and asked him if he would research court houses. The project took shape very quickly. I asked the president of Seagram if he would be interested and gave him an estimate of the costs,

which were considerable. His answer was affirmative, and we agreed to start with a smaller sum to test the project. After the pilot project was well under way, the total project was approved.

“Between the conception and the reality falls the shadow.” Without Richard Pare the project would never have become a reality. My commitments to the Montreal study and other work were such that there was no question of my carrying out the project. I am not even sure that I asked Richard to undertake the work. It was one of those exceptional occasions when you ask someone a question and that person takes it up and follows it through in a most brilliant and sensitive way.

The importance of the court house is far greater than its function as the administrative centre of each county. This becomes apparent from its position in the town, dominating the community, standing at the centre or on the highest eminence. It is often the most ambitious and innovative building of its time, the repository which serves to chronicle the history of each county from its incorporation to the present. In and around the buildings, monuments and memorials perpetuate significant (or once significant) events in the community. There are photographic displays of those who served and died in war, and glass cases containing samples of local manufacturing or produce. Always there are armed forces recruiting signs outside, and on the lawns or squares of Southern court houses memorials to the Confederacy and fallen Confederates.

Unfortunately, many fine court houses have been torn down and replaced by buildings of surpassing ugliness. The quality of public architecture has steadily degenerated since the First World War. With few exceptions, the newer ones are shoddy in construction techniques and materials. In both “renovated” old buildings and new ones, recessed fluorescent fixtures in suspended ceilings replace ornamental iron and glass candelabra, terrazzo replaces imported marble and mosaic floors, and reconstituted wood panels replace oak and fine plasterwork. The stated motives are usually rooted in expediency and the difficulty of maintaining older structures, but this neglects to recognize the rapid deterioration of many new buildings, not to mention the loss of dignity and respect for the law engendered by a fine court house. It is not understood that a building of character imparts character to a town; once destroyed, it cannot easily be replaced. When a fine building is demolished and superseded by mediocrity, the commercial centre no longer has any focus or individuality; continuous attrition takes place and will eventually homogenize the entire community to a lower standard. Even if a building is not the best of its kind — though it may be the best there is in its locale — it is important that it continue to act as a point of orientation for its environment and, by careful modification, be enabled to continue serving its function. In towns across the nation, the main streets, which in many cases include the court house, are despoiled by the devastating effects of insensitive remodelling. In summary, because the architecture of small communities is uncelebrated and rapidly vanishing, there is much to be done in recording the original aspects of architecture on the North American continent. The court house project described below is a step in this documentation.

What was needed at the outset was some information about the subject. The most obvious source was the Library of Congress, but it turned out to be disappointing for, while there were considerable resources concerned with the

legal administration of a county and other abstract matters, almost nothing survived dealing with architecture. More fruitful were the two agencies concerned with the heritage of the nation: the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the National Register of Historic Places are involved in cataloguing the buildings, battlefields, bridges, and historical arcana of the nation. Susan Dynes, a researcher who had worked for HABS, was asked to collect all the material on court houses she could find. She succeeded in gathering dossiers on about three hundred buildings. The material on file, however, was largely dependent upon the enthusiasm of each contributing state in providing information about its more significant buildings, and thus was rather arbitrary and inadequate. With these three agencies, all the easily accessible resources had been eliminated. The result was slender, by no means a sufficient groundwork for the project.

To add to this scanty information, Phyllis Lambert, the originator of the court house project, and I visited Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the distinguished architectural historian, in New York. His great knowledge of the history of American architecture was extremely useful, as were his suggestions regarding research procedures for the history of architecture. He also provided the names of further contacts and was able to recall certain buildings of note and the names of architects who might have been responsible for them. The best and most important source was a Columbia University doctoral dissertation written in 1970 by Paul Goeldner, "Temples of Justice," which gave extensive notations on about five hundred buildings in the Midwest and Texas, with particular emphasis on the court houses of Indiana.

In view of the inadequacy of most of the available material, it was necessary to locate new sources. We prepared a mailing to all 3,101 counties in the country; this was soon extended to state, county and local historical societies, Bar Associations, American Institute of Architects representatives, National Trust for Historic Preservation offices in various parts of the country, state preservation offices, and anyone else who might be able to supply information. The mailing was made up of an explanatory letter on a special letterhead announcing the project as a celebration of the United States Bicentennial, accompanied by a short form which requested available information on the date of the court house, the architect, costs, alterations, whether or not it was sited in a square, whether there was an older court house still standing, and any special events past or present, which might include famous trials or picnics on the lawn. Most important was a request for any images which they might be able to send. In response we received picture postcards, snapshots, newspaper pictures — even the corner engraving from the official stationery of the county!

The total number mailed in February 1975 came to about five thousand. During the next months about 40 percent of the recipients returned the forms with some information about more than two thousand court houses. This remarkably high response to a mail solicitation was probably due to the national anticipation of the Bicentennial year, but perhaps the project also seemed to people in many outlying areas an opportunity to become involved in a national programme of enduring importance. When the photographers later visited the areas from which no responses had come, they generally found that the quality of the buildings was of the lowest standard.

It was important in planning the project to think about visual criteria, and to see how one organized a national documentary project. This was done by studying similar projects, in particular, the files of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) documentary photography project directed by Roy Stryker during the Depression. Although the FSA project covered a much wider range of subject matter than would the one on court houses, it stands as a yardstick against which all subsequent ventures into documentary photography must be measured. It is a body of visual material which distils the essence of the country as it then was, an interpretation of great range and variety that comes together as a whole to make a powerful statement about its subject.

For further advice about current documentary photography, John Szarkowski, the director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, was consulted for his unequalled knowledge. He provided the names of photographers who he thought would be both capable and interested. His continuing support was demonstrated by recommendations to photographers that they come to see me and discuss the subject with a view to working on the project. The noted teacher and photographer, Aaron Siskind, directed valuable critical sessions for some of the photographers, helping them to shape their ideas of how to go about the work. He also provided the names of photographers in California, Texas and the Northeast.

My personal experience gained while documenting the grey stone buildings of Montreal was invaluable for having taught me how to photograph architecture. This was augmented by studying the work of such great architectural and documentary photographers of nineteenth-century Europe as Edouard Denis Baldus, Roger Fenton, the Bisson brothers and Robert McPherson. The tradition of architectural photography was strong in Europe at a time when the United States was preoccupied with landscape photography, particularly in the American West, the last vision of a utopian world. The directness of the American photographers of that period in portraying the Western landscape awed those who saw their images. The frankness and lack of artifice in the photographs showed what the land was like. This is the most important attribute of the documentary photograph — the directness with which it communicates information. The study of this material helped to define an approach to the subject. The FSA gave an idea of form and method, the landscape and architectural material of the nineteenth century gave the attitude and point of view.

It was important that the photographs for the project be able to stand on their own — outside the body of the archive — as fine photographs. Almost any collection of photographs of a given subject has some cumulative value but, if their quality is as high as possible, their value, both documentary and artistic, is immeasurably increased. A photograph made with integrity by a perceptive photographer communicates far more than mere visual information. By its associations in the mind of the beholder, it suggests far richer nuances and enters realms where the content is coloured by the experience of each person seeing the print. The qualities of a good documentary photograph are difficult to define. It is the selection of the significant detail, the choice of where to stand, and the decision of how the subject shall be framed (in other words deciding what to leave out) that are the basic tools of the photographer.

The subject is inevitably transfigured, at the most basic and mundane level, from a three-dimensional volume to a two-dimensional plane, but in the case of documentary photographs the transfiguration must not be at the expense of truth.

Even under the best conditions, the photographer of architecture is the slave of circumstance. Much depends on the time of day, time of year, and seasonal change: the most interesting facade may be in total shade for months during the winter; when the summer comes the same facade is obscured by trees which had seemed quite insignificant in the winter. Thus it is understandably difficult to capture the sense of a building through photographs and yet maintain a sense of its environment. All these difficulties are compounded by pressures of time and resources, which frequently necessitate moving on to the next building.

It was my job as editor of the book which was to result from this project to gather the research material and set up the administrative structure of the project. I outlined the procedure in a statement prepared at the very beginning which, though it was to be considerably modified later, provided a basis for discussion and decision. The intention of assembling an archive of material drawn from each state gave considerable importance to obtaining the services of photographers in different regions of the country. What evolved eventually was a loose and flexible division of territory, largely predicated on the necessity of avoiding having photographers duplicate each other's work. Their number also increased from ten to twenty-four as the project got under way. In January 1975 an office had been opened in the Seagram headquarters in New York to coordinate all aspects of the work. The secretarial services, and communications and duplication facilities available within the large corporation were invaluable. Frequent communication was to be an essential factor in the project. By telephone I kept in touch with photographers and county officials. Photographers called at frequent intervals and it was thus possible to track their progress accurately and to communicate further information which came into the office after they had begun photographing.

Having assembled a reasonable body of research material and established an organizational headquarters in New York, I was now ready to begin the photographic documentation. A pilot project was undertaken with the intention, among other things, of defining the project's objectives. We originally intended to start with Virginia, but this had to be quickly discarded. It was assumed that Virginia, one of the original colonies, might reasonably be expected to contain a wide range of architecture in its court houses but, as it has apparently never been able to shake off its Colonial and Federal past, most of its buildings are Colonial or Federal even up to the present. Virginia obviously would not do, so Indiana with its richly varied, though predominantly late nineteenth-century, architecture, became the choice. It was also the area known from Paul Goeldner's thesis. The extraordinary court houses of Indiana resulted from special state laws enabling city commissioners to appropriate large sums of money to finance flights of fancy utilizing good materials and fine craftsmanship. The buildings were erected at a time of enormous optimism and national expansion; the country was prosperous and the frontier moving rapidly westward. Subsequently, it became clear that, in terms

of the national standard, they would be unsurpassed in the quality of materials and architectural variety.

The work in the Midwest was balanced by dense coverage of the Eastern Seaboard States and the West, particularly California, where almost every building was photographed. In the East, as the size of each county is far smaller, it was impossible to be so exhaustive. For the same reason the county map of the nation showing the status of the project looks wildly unbalanced, for the counties in the West are so much larger than those in the East.

On 17 March 1975, the first dossier of information was dispatched to two Chicago photographers, Bob Thall and Lewis Kostiner, who began work later that month. They received carefully plotted routes showing the location of the Indiana court houses to be photographed. About six to ten buildings were pinpointed and the trip was expected to take two or three weeks. This information was accompanied by a letter outlining what the photographers were to do. What I asked from each photographer was certain basic images which they could then supplement using their own imagination. The most important requirement was for one general view of the exterior to show the structure of the building. This was to remain standard procedure until a complete range of building types was represented. The directives required the photographer to make his own decision about what else to photograph, a freedom of choice which made it imperative to choose the photographers carefully. They were chosen for their excellence and their ability to see well in terms of photography. It was not a necessity for them to be architectural photographers; those who were, were the exception rather than the rule. What I did consider important was that the work be carried out with view cameras. The large negatives (four-by-five-inch or larger) and increased control, particularly of perspective, ensure finely detailed images with only minor distortion. In most cases the film was processed by each photographer in his own darkroom or directly under his supervision and a set of contact prints made for immediate dispatch to New York. These would include a wide variety of building exteriors and a plethora of other material such as hallways, newel posts, courtrooms and displays. On receipt the contact prints were carefully studied and some were selected from which the photographer would make finished prints. Two copies of each print were prepared to high standards of permanence; these were then filed in the office in New York and provided the base of the archive from which exhibitions and the book have been drawn.

The photographers were selected with two objectives in mind: to establish coherence among them as a group and to provide a broad variety of points of view. It was important that some unity exist among the photographers and this was achieved partly through the tightly defined subject matter, partly by the large format negative sizes, and through the choice of the photographers themselves. All brought personal points of view developed from their own aesthetic standards and discrimination. This had a reinforcing effect on the archive as a whole and helped diminish the weak spots as each photographer's areas of particular interest complemented the others; for example, when it proved difficult to make good locational images showing a court house in relation to its surroundings, a memorandum was sent to the photographers asking them particularly to look for suitable vantage points for such pictures in order

to establish the idea of a building as the centre of its community. It would not have been possible to achieve the richness and diversity of imagery with a smaller group, and it would have taken far longer to complete the task. As it was, pictures were being added to the archive right up to the last minute, some even being incorporated in the book at the design stage.

The early months of the project were a learning process, particularly for me, and my knowledge of the subject was increased greatly by studying the contact prints sent to the office after each trip. Certain subtleties of detail and recurring images created motifs weighted with great symbolic meaning. The photographers always found the same basic vocabulary and the themes and variations reverberate through the pictures. These themes eventually coalesced to become the image of an American building which is central to the history of the country. The photographs portray the offices, the courtrooms, the squares, the monuments; all these were laid out in the pages of the book which culminated the project, providing greater insight into the court house than just its outer shell. The feelings which each building aroused in a photographer are communicated, from the most simple buildings to the most complex, from the most elegant to the most meagre. Consequently this book and the archive on which it is based are as complete a view of the American court house as can be assembled without being totally exhaustive. No attempt has been made to be comprehensive by numbers; rather, by careful selection across the entire spectrum, an image was assembled of an American building and a view of the development of an aspect of American history. This is conveyed through the photographs illustrating the whole chronology of the subject, starting in 1725 and finishing with buildings of the present decade.

The photography reached its high point during the summer of 1975 when twelve photographers were working in different parts of the country. At the same time the responses to the mailing were flowing into the office and all my efforts were taken up in considering the photographs and discussing them by letter and telephone with the photographers.

The final status of the archive is as follows: 1,054 buildings have been photographed and over eight thousand images made especially for the project by twenty-four photographers. Two sets of selected images by each represent the basis of the archive. The accompanying research materials gathered to facilitate and direct the photography amounts to twenty feet of lateral files, and five feet of related books and pamphlets. As the active photography of the project began to wind down, it became possible to draw conclusions at several different levels. Except for the major structural and stylistic differences of the two-and-one-half centuries spanned by the project, there are only small changes in courtroom layout. It still serves the same primary function, the dispensation of justice, that it did in 1725, when the earliest surviving court house in continuous use, in King William, Virginia, was built. No doubt the standard patterns of courtroom design go back even further. The architectural differences obviously define the period of the structure, but it is the modifications of each succeeding generation, the minor alterations, additions and subtractions, and the cumulative patina of use, which add to the sense of history and contribute greatly to the richness of the subject. The pictures which show these subtle variations have much to say about the activity of the generally un-

seen protagonists. When pictures of people have been included, it is to represent the symbolic roles which they fulfill: the sheriff wears his star and gun and stands in the jail; the judge in his robes is seated in his court room; and the county recorders, clerks, and other officers are in their offices surrounded by their records.

A more depressing conclusion concerns the architecture itself. There is to be seen in the photographs a steady decline in the quality of public architecture since 1918 as well as extensive evidence of wholesale destruction and callous modification. This renovation and redevelopment is continuing all the time and several buildings we have documented were subsequently destroyed or modified beyond recognition. On one occasion a photographer arrived in the square to find a bulldozer making the last few passes over newly levelled ground.

The major difference between the older buildings and those now being erected is the attitude of the community to its court house. Until after the First World War the court house represented the pride of each county in its self-determination, its ability to rule itself, and its standing for the idea of a democratic state. Consequently, the building was expected to reflect these values. It was the sign of a prosperous community when the court house was made from fine materials utilizing the most advanced construction techniques.

Now the court house that replaces those fine structures has come to represent a somewhat oppressive bureaucracy; the buildings portray the attitude of an electorate which may be better defined as a lack of attitude. The court house has become an irritation where the necessary obligations caused by living in a more complex society are fulfilled. It is no longer a symbol of pride in community and has become impersonal, reflecting the contemporary view of the role it fulfils.

The project has established the fact that there are still many court houses of great architectural merit, and provides an extremely useful tool for the study of American architecture and social values. It is now possible to examine in great detail the evolution of one building type all across the nation from 1725 to the present. The pictures are supported by extensive research materials providing an unequalled resource on the subject, as well as on previously unknown architects working in the country. It also provides a useful tool for scholars and conservationists. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has already used some of the pictures in an exhibition and in their publication on court house conservation. Various requests for pictures to support preservation efforts have been received and help was given where possible.

In order to disseminate the results of the project as widely as possible and make full use of its potential, an exhibition and book are in preparation. The exhibition will begin a three-year tour in early 1978 under the auspices of the American Federation of Arts in collaboration with the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Over a three-year period it will visit between forty-five and fifty centres. It will open at the Art Institute of Chicago and visit museums, court houses, libraries, and other suitable spaces across the country. In order to obtain as wide a distribution as possible, the exhibition will be available in two versions, and will include about 120 photographs.

The book will be available concurrently with the opening of the exhibition in Chicago and will contain some three hundred photographs complemented by three essays: Calvin Trillin on the genre and folklore of the court house, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and William Seale on its architecture, and a third on the historical importance of the county as a judicial unit in the development of the country.

The records created by this project will be placed in the public domain with an organization able to care properly for them, make reprints of good quality available from the negatives at modest cost, and provide access to scholars. Perhaps the results of this project will encourage similar undertakings, for the power of the photograph will give it a significant role in preserving our rapidly disappearing architectural heritage.



Old Orange County Court House, Goshen, New York, 1841-42. Architect Thornton M. Niven. (Photograph by Patrick Linchan)



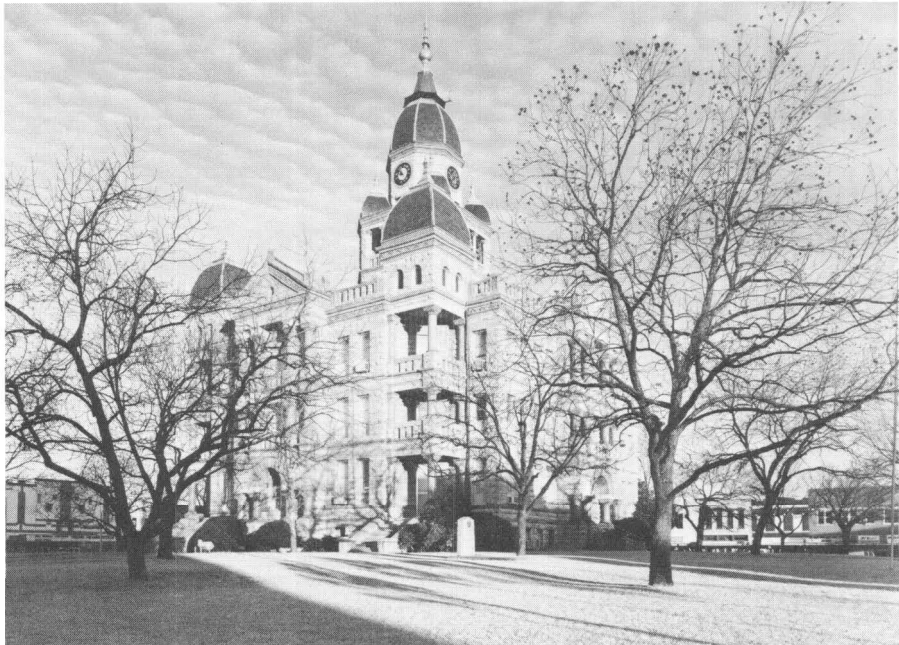
Essex County Court House, Essex, New Jersey, 1902-07. Architect Cass Gilbert.
(Photograph by Stephen Shore)



Hanover County Court House, Hanover, Virginia, ca. 1735. Architect unknown. (Photograph by Richard Pare)

Lincoln County Court House, Pownalborough, now Dresden, Maine, 1761. Builder Gersham Flagg. (Photograph by Douglas Baz)

US COURT HOUSE PROJECT



Lincoln County Court House, Wiscasset, Maine, 1824. Architect-Builder Tileston Cushing. (Photograph by Douglas Baz)

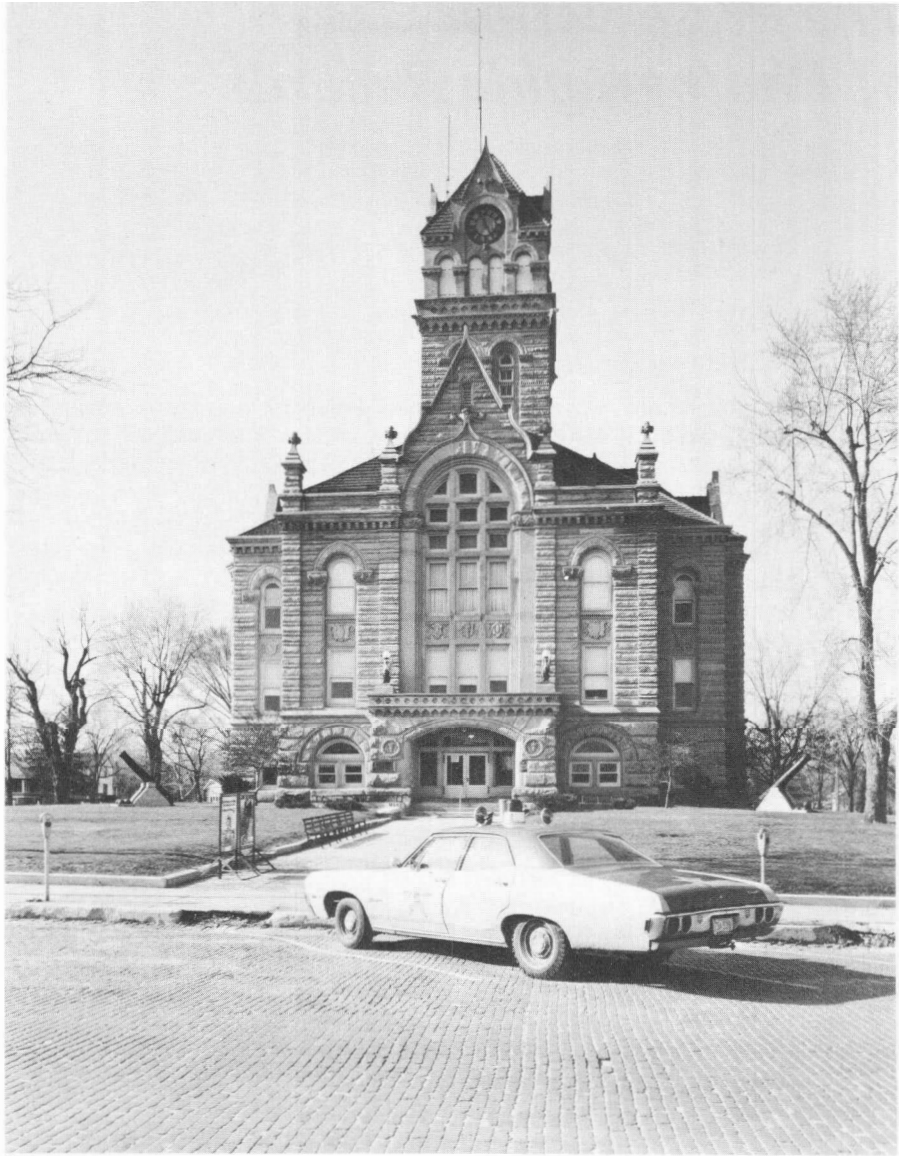
Denton County Court House, Denton, Texas, 1895-97. Architect W.C. Dodson. (Photograph by Lewis Kostiner)

ARCHIVARIA



City-County Municipal Building, Hennepin County, Minneapolis, Minnesota, ca. 1887-1906. Architects Long and Kees. (Photograph by Frank Gohlke)

City and County Building, Salt Lake County, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1891-94. Architects Proudfoot, Bird and Monheim. (Photograph by Tod Papageorge)



Starke County Court House, Knox, Indiana, 1897-98. Architects Wing and Mahurin.
(Photograph by Bob Thall)