



Mecklenburg County Courthouse Graces Uptown Charlotte with Beauty and Function

The BE&K Building Group, together with joint venture partners Turner Construction and Walter B. Davis Company, Inc., was responsible for constructing the new nine-story Mecklenburg County Courthouse in Charlotte, North Carolina. Sited at the eastern end of the Government District, the new courthouse serves as the gatepost to downtown Charlotte from the east. The new structure consolidates the court functions previously housed in three separate buildings. The 568,000-square-foot facility is the largest county courthouse in the state, and includes 35 finished and operational courtrooms, as well as 12 additional courtrooms that are ready to be furnished and staffed as needed.

The striking, triangle-shaped building is organized to provide clear, easily understood access to all its functions. The perimeter accommodates courtrooms and office space along the two

street frontages, with the public elevators, and a monumental stair on the third side, overlooking the courtyard. At the building's center, a day-lit atrium sets a restful semicircular form within the triangular space. Round columns define the inner semi-circle, supporting a public landscaped terrace at level four. The triangular space rises an additional two stories and is roofed with shallow plantings that can be seen from the upper floors.

The highest volume functions are located on the two entry levels, connected by escalators within the atrium to provide easy movement between floors. On the upper floors, courts are organized by function, with the sixth floor built as shell space for future expansion. The top floor is devoted to the judges' offices, conference spaces, and library, and the perimeter wall at this level is pulled back to provide landscaped terraces.



Erecting a facility of this size in the heart of Charlotte presented considerable challenges for the construction team. Construction required demolition of the existing courthouse parking deck, and provisions had to be made to reroute vehicle, pedestrian, and civil courthouse employee traffic and find alternative parking for affected vehicles.

Ancillary construction included a new underground tunnel to link the courthouse with the existing jail for the secure transfer of inmates between buildings. To construct the tunnel the team had to overcome the obstacle of trenching through one of the busiest streets in Charlotte, with only the three-day Memorial Day Weekend to accomplish the task. Beginning late Friday afternoon, they coordinated blasting operations, excavation around utility work, precise installation of the precast concrete sections, backfilling, and repaving of the road, which had to reopen by Tuesday morning to accommodate workday traffic.

A variety of earth-shoring systems was required during construction of the courthouse itself, due to the complexity of the new building foundation and its proximity to nearby streets and existing buildings. Working closely with the Charlotte and North Carolina Departments of Transportation to insure regulatory compliance, the Construction Group used an innovative combination of driven-pile and soil nailing techniques to reduce costs. Blasting and removal of approximately 15,000 cubic yards of rock began after the shoring systems were complete.

The project also included construction of a below-grade parking garage with a separate



Pictured top:
The room for potential jurors features the comforts of a state-of-the-art office.

Pictured bottom:
Kinetic sculpture by Ralph Helmick and Stuart Schechter of Boston in the Mecklenburg County Courthouse atrium.

ramp for use by judges and other courthouse employees.

The new facility incorporates many progressive amenities. The waiting room for potential jurors features plasma TVs, video games, and kitchen appliances, and a business center with computers, printers and fax. A free child-care facility is provided for juror parents and, for juror entertainment, movies are shown at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. daily.

Both beauty and function are integral to the design. A kinetic sculpture by Ralph Helmick and Stuart Schechter of Boston is a focal point in the atrium. Some 3,200 tiny portrait heads cast in pewter — created from scans of local citizens' faces and representing a demographic cross-section of the gender, race and age groups of the local community — hang on cables from a platform raised to the ceiling. Guided by computer and illuminated from below, these images combine to form stunning, three-dimensional "portraits" that change weekly.

Interior stone and marble were imported from Italy, Portugal and Zimbabwe. A commemorative display of period photographs documents Mecklenburg County's former courthouses. Recessed windows echo the window design of the previous, early-twentieth-century courthouse, and inspirational quotes have been etched into the granite and limestone exterior.

The new courthouse received its formal dedication on February 9th, a day of events that included an invitation-only appreciation breakfast and a luncheon for all courthouse personnel. More than 1,000 attendees celebrated the new facility and the state's system of law, with public tours of the facility provided throughout the day.

The architectural firm for the project was Kallmann, McKinnell & Wood.