

The west | JANUARY 14, 2007 Education of Thom Mayne

How the uncompromising L.A. architect learned to build on common ground **By Brett Campbell**

JUSTICE SERVED

The new federal courthouse in Eugene, Ore., a contemporary vision of democracy.



A

s he entered the Italian restaurant in Washington, D.C., Thom Mayne sharpened his attack plan in his mind. The bad boy of American architecture was about to meet his new nemesis for the first time, and he wanted to set the tone early.

His opponent that day in 2001 was U.S. District Judge Michael Hogan, a conservative jurist who stood for everything Mayne scorned. The court that Hogan oversaw would be the principal tenant of the Santa Monica architect's most ambitious project: one of the first major federal buildings of the century, a courthouse in Eugene, Ore.

Mayne already knew what Hogan thought of his concept. Hogan had sat on the panel that weighed the design options, and he was appalled at Mayne's modernist visions. When a panel member presented the proposal from Mayne's partnership, Morphosis, Hogan pounced, pummeling the man with hostile questions for 4 hours. Most of Hogan's objections stemmed from Mayne's space-age scheme, which looked nothing like a traditional courthouse, certainly not the U.S. Supreme Court building that Hogan so revered.

In the end, Hogan was outvoted. It was a major coup for Morphosis. But Mayne knew there was no way he'd get to build the courthouse he wanted without cooperation from the man who would run it.

And that's why Hogan had arranged the meeting at the restaurant on C Street near the U.S. Capitol—to see if the architect and the judge could find common ground. In his three-decade career, Mayne had always worked best in an atmosphere of confrontation; he typically kicked off relationships with clients by aggressively defining his artistic identity. He had researched the judge, and learned that he was a Christian and had been appointed by the first President George Bush. His rulings—especially those pertaining to environmental issues—often had provoked liberals, who were especially prevalent in

the college town of Eugene. Only two years apart in age, Hogan and Mayne had both grown up in the 1960s—but on opposite sides.

Leaning forward at the table, the 6-foot-5-inch Mayne, wearing a black shirt adorned with a red star and his trademark striped socks, launched into his rehearsed diatribe, dark brown eyes glowering above his goatee. "My heroes are Che Guevara, Martin Luther King, Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, Jimi Hendrix," he declared. The fusillade continued as Mayne lambasted Hogan's judicial record, religious beliefs, even his taste in architecture and art, which favored traditional Greek Revival columns and photos and drawings of eagles like those that decorated his chambers.

Hogan, whose genial demeanor belied his august title, took a deep breath. He was coming to realize that Mayne regarded this encounter not as an angry battle—the attacks weren't personal—but more like the rough play of a pickup basketball game. Finally, Hogan smiled.

"Thom," he said, "I get it. You're pushing me because you need to know: Do I have what it takes to be a friend or an adversary or whatever this relationship is gonna be? But the point is, we're joined at the hip."

Born in Connecticut, Mayne grew up in Tipton, Ind., and Chicago, moving to Whittier in 1954 after his parents' divorce. He graduated from USC in 1968. Imbibing the spirit of the 1960s like cannabis smoke, Mayne and some equally edgy colleagues who were teaching at Cal Poly Pomona decided to create their own countercultural school for radical architects. Opening in 1972, the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) gained accreditation four years later and now boasts 500 students and 80 faculty members. Mayne also started the partnership in 1972, naming it Morphosis—loosely translated from Greek to mean "to be in formation." Both entities rejected received wisdom and advocated a more intuitive, interdisciplinary architecture (encompassing interior design and graphics) that emerged from what Mayne calls "the intelligence of things"—materials, fragments of physical objects



THE GRAND INTERIOR

As an antidote to the gloomy weather, the federal building is suffused with light, which streams through the skylights above the courtroom waiting area, far left, and bounces off burnished steel-clad pillars and stainless steel panels in the 85-foot-high atrium, center. The courtrooms themselves are softened by cherry and walnut accents and a teardrop design that uses lighting and decor to focus attention on the judge, near left.

and the relationships among them, the process of change and creation itself. His work reflected the freethinking tradition of West Coast composers such as John Cage and other California artists and architects, from the Eameses to contemporaries like Frank Gehry.

Mayne applied his principles to his projects, beginning with the Sequoyah Educational Research Center in Zuma Beach, which won a 1974 Progressive Architecture award and led to a parade of increasingly prominent Morphosis-designed residences and restaurants in Venice, Hermosa Beach and Santa Barbara. But then, during the 1980s, when it should have been leveraging its early accolades into bigger commissions, Morphosis had trouble getting projects built. Some attributed the difficulty to Mayne's prickly, even combative disposition. Projects often turned into prolonged battles of attrition that left clients unwilling to work with him again. Mayne's fiercely original designs mirrored his aggressive personality, and too often they ultimately amounted to nothing more than castles in the air, would-be buildings constructed out of anger and idealism rather than concrete and steel.

As the failures mounted, so did Mayne's frustration. He later called himself a "raving maniac" during that period. By the early 1990s, despite its reputation as a venue for visionaries, Morphosis was down to half a dozen architects and was half a million dollars in debt.

After their friction-filled first encounter in Washington, Mayne and Hogan resolved to get to know each other. The judge was proud of his extensive training and practice as a mediator. "An extremely important attribute for a judge mediator is the ability to listen," Hogan had written in a law review article. He invited Mayne to teach him about his art.

They spent a weekend at a ski cabin in Sunriver, a resort town in central Oregon, and Mayne brought with him hundreds of slides of great buildings, as well as every project Morphosis had ever created. They discovered a common taste for Bordeaux wines, which fueled long discussions. After decades

as a lawyer and judge, Hogan had learned how to grasp a range of complex issues. He proved a quick study. After Sunriver he bought books and subscriptions to magazines about architecture.

The most successful projects, Mayne knew, emerged from passionate give-and-take. Mayne liked bluntness, and expected the same from Hogan. "A certain amount of toughness from a client helps develop the best works," he told the judge. Volatile collaborations depended on clients who would push back hard, but in the end accede to the architect's vision. Would Michael Hogan be one of them?

The judge intended the new courthouse—"the first in-depth look at courtroom design in decades," he was fond of proclaiming—to accommodate the 21st century's demands on the judiciary. Although most people still thought of courthouses as places where trials happened, the expansion of government's role in society during the past century had swelled the courts' administrative, bureaucratic and support functions, one reason so many 20th century courthouses look so much like office buildings. Hogan wanted the public areas of the Eugene building—the courtrooms—to take precedence over the offices.

The building also would have to accommodate 21st century justice technology; contemporary trials often rely on PowerPoint projections, video testimony from distant witnesses and computer-assisted research and presentations. And the building would have to adjust to heightened security concerns. "I didn't want it to be like walking into a fortress or a precinct station," Hogan said. "We're not afraid, and we're not going to act like we're afraid." Hogan imagined a building that had nothing to hide. "I wanted light to shine in on the judicial process, so that people would understand it. I wanted this courtroom to bring transparency back to the public square."

Transparency in government—now that was a goal Mayne could get behind. And the opportunity to rethink courtroom design for a new era appealed to his impulse for innovation.

At a second meeting at a cabin on the McKenzie River—famous for its fishing, boating, rafting and surrounding national

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 33]

Thom Mayne

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17] parks and forests—Hogan took Mayne for a hike. “This,” Hogan said, gesturing to the trees, “is my world.” Eugene wasn’t L.A.; it wasn’t even Portland. Its eco-hippies, timber barons and recreational boaters and hunters shared a deep affection for Oregon’s natural environment. For its constituents to feel welcome, any public building in Eugene would have to acknowledge the state’s pastoral mythology.

Mayne glimpsed the potential for shared values with his adversary. Conservative jurists were fond of seeking the original intent of lawmakers and the authors of the Constitution, and going back to the original ideals of courthouse design—making them instantly recognizable symbols of public authority—required overturning current practices. As he flew back to Los Angeles from Oregon, Mayne began to suspect that he might be able to work with Hogan after all.

Though still capable of ferocious intensity, Mayne had mellowed since Morphosis’ turbulent early days. He could appreciate the ebullient Irish American jurist’s sense of humor, and his thick skin. As the wine and ideas flowed, the two men were developing a working relationship despite their real differences.

At their meetings in the Oregon woods, they had realized they both wanted the courthouse to embody the values of transparency, innovation and democracy. And both wanted it to possess a sense of “otherness” so it wouldn’t be confused with private office buildings. Yet Hogan wanted to go back to the past; Mayne wanted to create something new. How could Mayne show his erstwhile antagonist that the great building they both wanted could be achieved by only looking forward?

While Morphosis was reeling from the setbacks of the late 1980s and early ’90s, Mayne was learning from the contentious client relationships and from his experience as a teacher, first at SCI-Arc, then at UCLA and eventually as a visiting lecturer at universities around the world. The academic arena provided the intellectually voracious Mayne (who earned a master’s degree at Harvard during a sabbatical in 1978) an ideal platform to develop his ideas about architecture, and to describe them to students. He grew adept at articulating the logic underlying his audacious visions rather than browbeating clients into accepting them on his word.

Mayne found another, bigger platform when Morphosis started entering competitions for public projects and began winning a number of them. Mayne gained leverage from his reputation as well as from the end-of-the-century trend away from what he regarded as dull, timid postmodernism. He was abetted by enlightened bureaucrats such as the U.S. General Services Administration’s Ed Feiner, who established the Design Excellence Program jury process that encouraged innovative architects to bid on government buildings—the program that awarded Morphosis the Eugene courthouse.

The firm’s public projects soon began winning national accolades, starting with Mayne’s 1993

design for Diamond Ranch High School. Nestled along a hillside in Pomona, the 72-acre concrete and metal campus cleverly responded to its natural surroundings while providing angular clusters of communal spaces that felt much more inviting than some of Mayne’s earlier, more severe constructions. Two more impressive schools soon followed: a 1999 elementary school in Long Beach and L.A.’s Dr. Theodore T. Alexander Jr. Science Center School. Mayne’s biggest downtown L.A. project, the neon-accented Caltrans headquarters, drew plaudits for its metallic interior curves as well as criticism for what Los Angeles Times architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne called its “brooding quality and dispiriting personality.” All these projects used contemporary materials and technology to embody Mayne’s energetically fragmentary vision, complete with exposed structures and jutting metal surfaces. And Morphosis managed to finish them on time and within budget despite the constraints of tight government budgets and rules. Mayne had to pull off the same trick in Eugene.

Once he understood what Hogan wanted, Mayne needed to do some teaching. He knew that photos could never express the power of real architecture. Maybe if Hogan could experience truly visionary modern public buildings, he might understand Mayne’s perspective. So in April 2001, when Hogan was vacationing in France, Mayne flew there to show the judge “the kind of strong, unfettered architecture that’s hard to find in this country”: Le Corbusier’s Notre-Dame du Haut in Ronchamp; the Cartier foundation building; one courthouse by Britain’s Richard Rogers, the Tribunal de Grande Instance in Bordeaux; and another by France’s Jean Nouvel, the Palais de Justice in Nantes.

Nouvel wanted the Nantes courthouse—a black, brooding steel-and-glass box that frowned from the banks of the Loire River—to represent the power of justice. Hogan stared at it for a long time. Then he and Mayne went inside to see the courtrooms, and Hogan felt a chill. He pondered his reaction as they boarded the train to Paris.

“Well, I see why you brought me here,” Hogan said. A notion that had been coalescing for Hogan had solidified: Eugene could have a world-class building, or a building that fit traditional notions—but not both.

As Mayne had hoped, Hogan had learned something crucial about what made buildings truly important. “He saw how the architect’s position in society there was different,” Mayne recalled later. “They have more of a voice, they’re not invisible, not gutless, they’re not making mere office buildings. These buildings, love them or hate them, they’re present. He understood the presence.”

The new European courthouses drew much of their power from their use of modern materials and ideas. The classic buildings of history—even the great medieval French cathedrals—looked the way they did because the methods and materials available at the time in large part dictated certain forms. To use those forms now, in an era of different ideas and more advanced technology, would be nothing short of fraudulent. Mayne told Hogan that “whatever we build has to have that authenticity” that



THE ENTRY: The outer staircase evokes the Supreme Court building while also impeding car-bomb attacks.

the French courthouses exuded.

While the judge acknowledged the power that these buildings packed, he argued that power alone wasn’t enough. Power can be used for evil—and Nouvel’s courtroom design sent a guilty-until-proven-innocent message with its blood-red furnishings, harsh blue lighting and judge and prosecutor sitting on the same level.

“You can have a courtroom that makes the defendant automatically guilty,” Hogan told Mayne.

As the train chugged toward Paris and the judge continued to press his case, Mayne realized that Hogan was right: The details of the courtrooms—the materials of the walls, the color of the carpets, the quality of lighting, the positioning of the actors in a legal drama—all could influence the outcome of a trial. And Hogan, instinctively skeptical of big government, wanted the courtroom to suggest to everyone what their roles were so a judge could “quietly keep his hand on the tiller” without the building glorifying him.

Nantes was a turning point. For the first time, the judge and the architect had seen through each other’s eyes and found a shared vision. Rather than glorifying power, the Eugene courthouse could convey values important to both Hogan and Mayne—transparency, democracy, gravity, “publicness”—and do so in a contemporary fashion. They also settled on a working process. Hogan would explain the meaning he wanted conveyed and would respond if something Morphosis proposed didn’t seem right to him. That left the initiative in the architect’s hands, and Hogan in his accustomed role—judging.

Once Mayne realized Hogan wasn’t trying to dictate design, and that the two were most comfortable with authority over different realms of the project, he felt no sense of competition. In fact, he and Hogan relished the chance to engage in intense

discussion and debate over big ideas—history, philosophy, aesthetics.

The design went through over 25 revisions. Mayne and Hogan spent hundreds of hours on everything from the biggest concepts to seemingly minute details, such as the color of varnishes. For a while, Hogan was spending almost every other weekend in Santa Monica at Morphosis. Over time, the two men became good friends. “The thing that’s so wonderful about working with you,” Mayne told Hogan, “is that you’re still alive. Most people our age are intellectually dead, but you’re still growing and learning. I hope I am too.”

Hogan proved a valuable ally, deterring Mayne’s ideas from criticisms by various officials, including fellow conservatives such as Gordon Smith, Oregon’s Republican U.S. senator. They were a team. When they were about to enter a hearing room to present the design to the Oregon congressional delegation, Mayne whispered to his new partner: “Mike, if you think I need to shut up, just give me a signal.”

In December, the 270,000-square-foot Wayne L. Morse U.S. Courthouse opened for business, bearing the marks of the two principal figures who made it happen. skin, exposed structural elements and jutting metal features unmistakably brand the building as a Thom Mayne creation, perhaps one of his finest, if a bit tame by Morphosis standards—which is to say that it’s striking, not startling. Mayne used what he calls “the language of the ribbon,” with voluptuous curved surfaces softening the potentially harsh face of justice.

To enter that gleaming edifice, you ascend a grand staircase—just like at Hogan’s beloved Supreme Court. The elevated main floor, characteristic of early courthouse layouts, is based on the *piano nobile*, a concept going back to Renaissance public buildings. Wing-like load-bearing walls evoke columns, though hardly the Greek marble style of the old courthouses.

The six courtrooms—softened by cherry and walnut accents and enclosed by stainless steel-walled pavilions that surmount the administrative

areas below—embody Hogan’s ideals. Mayne’s teardrop design eliminates wasted space and uses lighting and decor to focus attention on the judge, who presides at the narrow end of the room. A subtly recessed jury box makes jurors feel protected yet able to easily see everything happening.

Hogan insisted that the mediation rooms help build the sense of confidence antagonists need to be able to compromise, so the tables are all round or oval and the rooms suffused with natural light.

And even though they’re embedded in a bulky building, the courtrooms are also showered with light, a precious commodity during gloomy Pacific Northwest winters. It sneaks through cleverly positioned apertures high up on three of their four walls and provides a connection to the outside world. It achieves the symbolic transparency that both Hogan and Mayne craved.

By day, the building’s glass curtain exterior wall gives frequent glimpses of the natural world so important to Oregonians. (Hogan had to fight hard for that, because government officials fretted about security.) Light also emanates from within, thanks to the central courtyard, and slips between the steps of the transparent interior staircase, spouts up from the translucent panels embedded in the floor in front of the elevators, spills down from long skylights, sneaks through steel mesh, and bounces off burnished steel-clad pillars and stainless steel panels in the 85-foot-high central atrium. It glows from the backlit screens of New York artist Matthew Ritchie’s installation artwork, lightboxes that meander along the main hallway and sport images and text that evoke the history of the law and the Willamette River. At night, from the outside, the courthouse exudes light. Hogan hopes it will be a beacon of justice.

Awaiting certification as a “green” building, it incorporates the latest

security measures, but unobtrusively. For example, that elevated staircase not only provides the ascent to justice of the old-time courthouses, it also makes it impossible for a car to drive right up to the entrance.

And, after an adjustment for soaring steel prices, the building came in on budget—\$76 million.

Considering how much time he and his firm devoted to it, Mayne says the project did more for Morphosis’ reputation than for its bottom line. Although most reviews have been laudatory, a few local observers found the courthouse too modern or denounced Mayne’s decision to turn its back on the river. Hawthorne, the Times critic, found it more genial than thought-provoking. He knocked some “saccharine” details (such as the wall-sized text from the Constitution near the entrance) but called the courthouse “the most humane and accessible public building of Mayne’s career.”

It won a Progressive Architecture award and became the first American courthouse to be included in the Venice Biennale. Mayne took a giddy Hogan—by now a knowledgeable fan of modern architecture—to the biennale and introduced him to other starchitects, including Nouvel, who designed the Nantes courthouse.

Morphosis is riding high and commissions are pouring in. Buildings recently completed or underway include several from GSA (a federal office building in San Francisco, a satellite control facility in Maryland), a commercial office and retail space in Austria, a design center in Taiwan, an office building in Seoul, a multi-purpose university student center in Cincinnati and, most prominently, a spectacular tower in Paris.

The firm’s resurgent decade culminated in the selection of Mayne as recipient of the 2005 Pritzker Prize, architecture’s highest honor. The bad boy outsider had at last been welcomed into the temple.

Perhaps more than anything, the planning and building of the Eugene courthouse showed how much

Mayne has changed during the past decade. “This project has matured me, contributed to my development as a human being,” he said. “I won’t be so quick to pigeonhole people like Michael [or] pull the trigger when I meet someone I don’t agree with.”

To Mayne, the process of making the building was as important as the building itself.

“We never let go of what was valuable. We proved that you can negotiate till you come up with something mutually compatible and that’s still strong and significant and not neutral.”

In a country as polarized as ours, Mayne found hope in the ability of two disparate characters to look beyond superficial labels and differences and “produce a significant piece of work that’s going to last hundreds of years. And I’m proud of that.” ■

Brett Campbell writes for the Wall Street Journal, Oregon Quarterly and other publications. He lives in Portland, Ore.