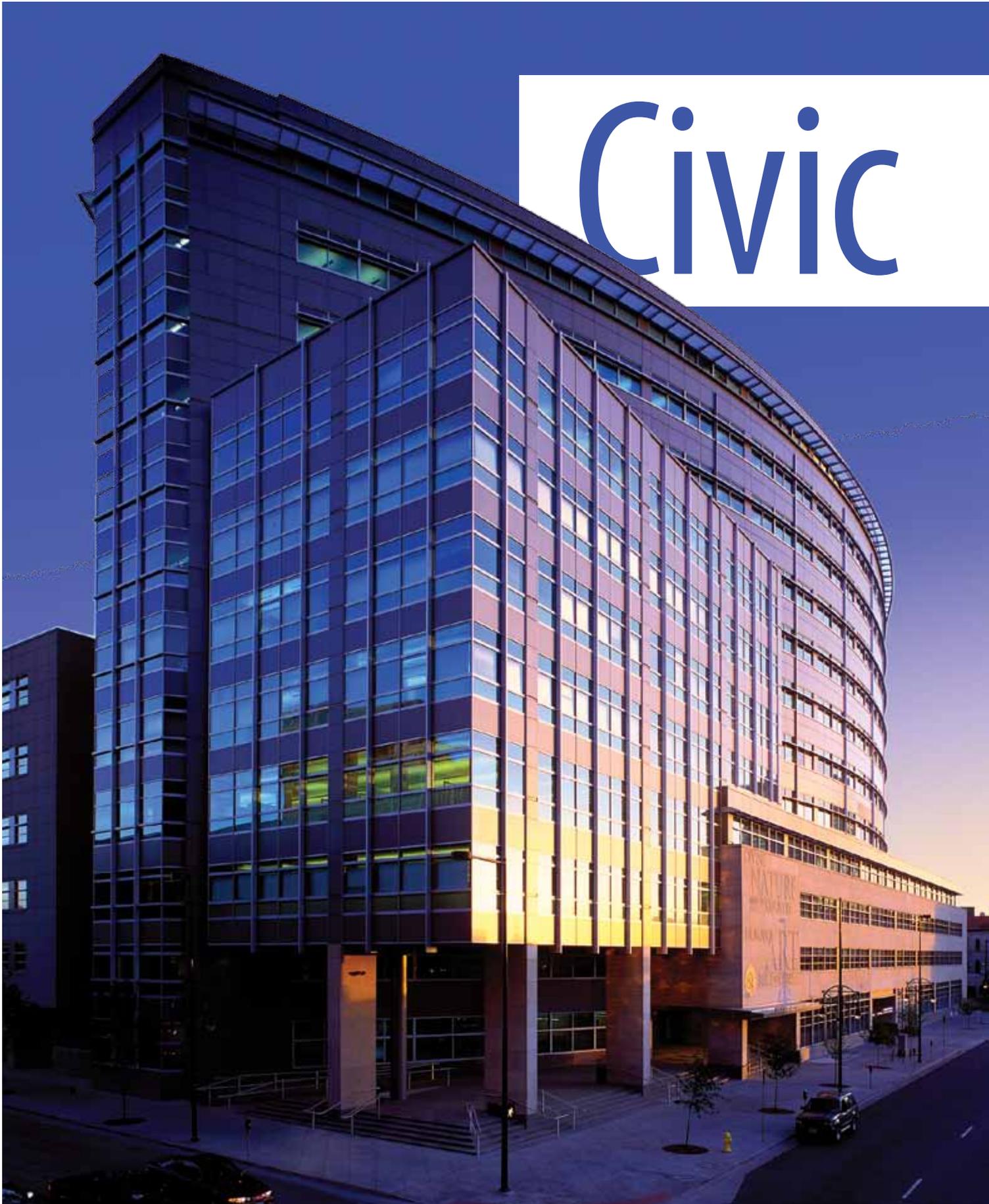


# Civic



# Lesson:

## The Wellington E. Webb Municipal Office Building

Interdisciplinary Design Team  
Led by Tryba Architects and  
RNL Creates a Dynamic Urban  
Landmark That Pays Homage  
to the Past and the Future

*by Sarah Goldblatt, AIA*



Before the Wellington E. Webb Municipal Office Building opened in autumn 2002, doing business with the city of Denver was often a logistical nightmare.

It could take weeks or months for a contract to be signed or for a permit to be issued. Documents requiring review or signatures would be slipped into an inter-office envelope that would then travel between some of the 40 agencies distributed among 16 different buildings.

“Most of the time, you would have no idea where the envelope was, because we had no tracking method,” admitted Derek Brown, then the asset manager for the city of Denver. Similarly, the public would be given something akin to a treasure map and bread crumbs to locate the agencies they needed. These were just some of the problems endemic to a decentralized city structure with many agencies in leased office space subject to market fluctuation and landlord discretion.

In December 1999, Brown and a team of analysts responsible for coordinating all space and real estate acquisitions for the city were looking ahead to the next five to 10 years and realized that 95 percent of their leases were expiring in 2002. “It became clear that we had an opportunity to consolidate space,” Brown recalled.

What followed reshaped the business of running the city.

Within six months, Brown’s team had accomplished something unprecedented: the approval of Mayor Wellington Webb and the unanimous endorsement of the city council to move forward with the design and construction of a 600,000-square-foot building that would allow the city to consolidate agencies, manage costs and, ultimately, serve the public more effectively.

With a business model in place, a development partner on board, programming underway and site selection complete, the prestigious design and construction award remained. An RFQ was issued, and the field narrowed to three esteemed teams: Humphries Poli Architects with OZ Architecture and Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects, Gensler with Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects, and Tryba Architects with RNL. A rigorous competition ensued that required

the teams to select a contractor and engage in intense design, schedule and cost investigations that would ultimately result in a viable solution along with an unconditional guaranteed maximum price. The local team of Hensel Phelps Construction Co., Tryba Architects and RNL emerged as the hometown favorites and set to work on the literal act of building the city.

In what would now be referred to as “integrated project delivery,” the design-build team moved in together on the top floor of the historic Annex One building at West Colfax Avenue and 14th Street — a vestige of the University of Denver’s plan to establish a downtown campus adjoining Civic Center and one of the city’s best remaining examples of International-style architecture, albeit diminished from years of neglect. In a unique programmatic request, done at the urging of then-Planning Director Jennifer Moulton, FAIA, the Annex One structure was required to be rehabilitated and incorporated into the new municipal office complex.

The interdisciplinary workplace allowed the team to experience the existing building and site conditions on a daily basis and to capitalize on the collaborative opportunities afforded by working in close proximity to one other — an arrangement that mirrored the desired outcome of the new building.

“We could literally spin our chair around and talk to the contractor about an idea and see what ramifications it had to the budget and schedule,” remarked Bill Moon, AIA, principal of Tryba Architects. “It was a very streamlined way of communicating — out of those conversations the design grew and evolved and was very well informed by the contractor.”



## Wellington E. Webb Municipal Office Building

**Architect:** Tryba Architects and RNL

**Location:** Denver

**Construction Cost:** \$132 million

**Function:** Municipal

**Completion Date:** August 2002

**Owner:** Civic Center Office Building Inc.

**Developer:** Mile High Development, LLC

**Contractors:** J.A. Walker/Hensel Phelps Construction Co.

**Mechanical Engineer:** BCER Engineering, Inc.

**Civil Engineer:** RJ Consulting, Inc.

**Electrical Engineer:** Roos Szynskie Associates, Inc

**Structural Engineer:** Martin/Martin Consulting Engineers

**Interior Design:** RNL

**Lighting Design:** Roos Szynskie Associates, Inc

**Landscape Design:** RNL

While much of the building concept was established during the initial competition, the design evolved quickly during the remaining fast-track phases. With a survey course of 20th-century architectural history at the doorstep of the project, the challenge was to produce a building with a dynamic urban presence that would pay homage to the past and the future. The site was further impacted by the confluence of the diagonal street grid of the central business district and the orthogonal plat used east of Broadway, thus rendering the building a significant pivot point between downtown and the Civic Center.

The result? A light-infused public atrium space that acts as a figurative street linking Annex One to a graceful 12-story elliptical office tower — an iconic form that subtly reflects the curving paths and monuments located throughout Civic Center Park. The tower affords building occupants panoramic views of the city and also treats the adjacent I.M. Pei-designed hotel with deference — bending gently to acknowledge its tripartite end condition and, according to David Tryba, FAIA, “preserving the elegance of its 400-foot-long facade.” “We didn’t want to put another uninterrupted slab right up against it,” he explained. “And we also needed to provide a transition from the height of the tower to the neighboring City and County Building.”

To achieve the desired scale reductions across the site, the architects borrowed the syntax of Annex One, with its horizontal lines, ribbon windows and smooth stone veneer, to establish a second four-story lime-

stone-clad volume on the opposing side of the tower. The resulting bookend condition effectively establishes a balanced base and reinforces the street edge at the pedestrian level where the entries occur.

Straightforward delineation of the curtain wall, mullions, spandrel panels and sun-shading devices evokes the neighboring Miesian-influenced Mile High Tower, designed by I.M. Pei, FAIA, and Henry Cobb, FAIA, in 1956. The extrapolation of these details combined with stepped masses further serve to temper the office tower’s profile. “There was an effort to acknowledge all these pieces of the city and create a focal point that relates to the city center and the Civic Center,” recalled RNL Principal Richard T. Anderson, AIA, LEED AP. “The design reflects all the urban design goals that we were looking for and produced a building that we hope is timeless in design and not necessarily reflective of just one era.”

The architects not only embraced the architectural genealogy of the site, but they also looked toward sustaining its resources for the future. The design team wanted to meet the city’s established energy goals and develop innovative concepts beyond the LEED requirements that were in their infancy at that time. Sustainable-design strategies included the adaptive reuse of Annex One, abundant distribution of natural light, low-e glazing, sunshades, recycled materials, extensive metering and verification of utilities, reflective roofing and alternative transportation features. In



2003, the Environmental Protection Agency awarded the Webb municipal building ENERGY STAR certification for reducing its carbon footprint and for its commitment to energy efficiency. In 2007, it received a LEED Gold rating in the Existing Building category.

While the design-build team could anticipate the environmental imperatives, no one predicted the events of Sept. 11, 2001, as the construction documents

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neared completion and excavation for the building had begun. The lofty atrium space, envisioned to foster community interaction and provide a public shortcut between Civic Center and the urban core, was retrofitted with DIA-style security devices once the building opened. The architects concurred in their wish to have the security measures more seamlessly integrated than

they are now. Additionally, the three levels of below-grade parking, intended to accommodate visitors and city employees and provide overflow for Civic Center events, have been restricted to city vehicles only.

Still, the building successfully achieves the city’s mandate to enable the co-location of 40 municipal agencies and divisions and houses 1,800 employees. But best of all, perhaps, is that it provides a “one-stop shopping center for all needs related to construction, development and planning,” Anderson explained.

Peter Park, Denver’s director of community planning and development, commented, “The building has been very conducive to the evolving delivery of development services, which is a testament to how sustainable the original design ideas were.” He added, “From an urbanistic perspective, the building does what all great civic buildings do — it has the enduring features of an iconic civic object, and it’s supportive of the urban fabric.”

Building occupants and users agree that doing business with the city has dramatically improved since the Wellington E. Webb Municipal Office Building opened, and employees feel a greater sense of value. To this sentiment, Tryba responded, “To me, it speaks of our aspirations as a community as we contemplate the daily activity of building a future.” ●

## Remembering Jennifer Moulton, FAIA

“You didn’t know you came to make a city,” begins the inscription on the limestone wall of Annex One within the atrium of the Wellington E. Webb Municipal Office building. “Nobody knows when a city is going to happen,” concludes the passage. These words were selected as a tribute to Jennifer Moulton, FAIA, who served as planning director for 12 years during the Webb administration until her death in 2003 at age 53. In fact, some might counter the engraved sentiment and say that she knew precisely that she came to make a city — a big, bright, vibrant one, at that. Moulton, one of only two female planning directors for the city of Denver, left an indelible mark on the urban fabric. Characterized as “feisty, strong-willed, fiercely loyal, funny, passionate and

intelligent” by her family and those who knew her, Moulton was involved in projects that ranged from the expansion of the Denver Central Library to the selection of Daniel Libeskind as architect for the Frederic C. Hamilton Building at the Denver Art Museum.

She was a proponent of New Urbanism and believed that lively neighborhoods with pedestrian activity are essential for a healthy city. She wove these urban design objectives into Blueprint Denver — a major land-use and transportation plan for the city that informed her work on the redevelopment of Stapleton, Lowry Air Force Base and the Central Platte Valley.

Communication among colleagues, city officials and community groups was central to her mission, and she

engaged a wide range of stakeholder groups in project discussions to ensure that everyone had a voice. She also had the strategic ability to bridge disparate interests that included “recognizing the role that history plays in cities and understanding that buildings have to have economic uses,” explained developer Bill Mosher, who worked in tandem with Moulton on many projects.

Moulton’s friends and colleagues cite numerous entries in her list of accomplishments and contributions to the city, but they also note that she wasn’t so concerned with creating her own legacy. To her, according to Mosher, “It wasn’t whether you won or lost — it was the inherent good that came out of participating in the process.”