

Montgomery County Justice Center

Project Narrative

June 2021

SOM's design for the new Montgomery County Justice Center transforms the core of Norristown, Pennsylvania, introducing generous new civic spaces and bold contemporary architecture while restoring a county landmark. The project, which consolidates the county's court and administrative facilities into a single 508,150-square-foot campus and encompasses a reimagined public park, is the largest project ever undertaken by the county government and one of the largest courthouse projects currently under construction in the country.

In addition to creating a state-of-the-art facility designed to meet the county's needs for the next 100 years, the Justice Center enhances the vitality of downtown Norristown through signature public spaces and new links to the surrounding streets. Encompassing the construction of a 322,500-square-foot new building in addition to the renovation of the existing courthouse, the project turns an inward-facing complex into one that opens to the city and welcomes the public.

Built in 1856 and expanded in 1902, 1930, and 1970, the courthouse is an important symbol of county government and a landmark in the heart of Norristown. SOM's design restores the neoclassical building's historic features, removing elements of the subsequent additions that obstruct views of its copper dome and modernizing its interiors. A new glazed atrium links the existing and new buildings, creating a bright and welcoming entrance to the complex while emphasizing both the rich past and promising future of Montgomery County.

The new building, located to the south of the courthouse, embraces the steep topography of the site and frames views of the historic dome. The building's massing lowers as it approaches Main Street, tracking the site's sloping elevation and lending the complex an approachable feel. Its cladding is primarily fritted glass with a marble pattern, a nod to the building's historic neighbor and a contemporary take on the Pennsylvania "King of Prussia" Blue Marble famously quarried in Montgomery County.

Enduring principles of simplicity and clarity are central to the functional planning effort. The structural grid of the site allows for the flexible arrangement of courtrooms, circulation, support rooms, and hearing rooms. The project adds 18 courtrooms in the new building as well as two new and six renovated courtrooms in the historic courthouse for a total of 26 courtrooms within the Justice Center campus. The new building includes eight family courts, seven criminal courts, two problem-solving courts, and one special proceedings court; the historic building includes six civil courts and two orphan courts. All courtrooms in the new building are stacked in a linear bar, creating an efficient arrangement that minimizes travel distances and permits a high degree of flexibility and security.

Sustainability played a key role in all aspects of the project design, from the enhanced landscape to the fritted glass cladding. The project is targeting LEED Gold certification and includes a variety of sustainable features, including the replacement of aged HVAC, power, lighting, windows, and roofing in the historic courthouse as well as a new central utility plant and highly efficient fixtures in the new building. Green roofs and bioretention landscaping with native plantings throughout the campus pay homage to the local Schuylkill River basin and significantly reduce stormwater runoff. Collectively, the project's sustainability features will realize a 26 percent energy use reduction over ASHRAE 90.1 2013, a 40 percent indoor water use reduction, and a 50 percent irrigation reduction.