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## The Good, the Bad and the Butt-Ugly: West Texas Courthouses

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### An Introduction

I have decided I am an expert in something, so I am going to write about it: West Texas courthouses. It seems I've spent most of my adult life in a West Texas courthouse, or preparing to try a case in a West Texas courthouse, or traveling to or from a West Texas courthouse. There may be other lawyers out there who have some similar experience, but I have declared myself the most qualified to write about West Texas courthouses.

I don't know how far I will get with this project, as West Texas includes a huge expanse of far-flung courthouses, but I hope to review most of those in the 24-county region known as the South Plains of Texas.

My courthouse review will not be objective: I know little about architecture or civic planning or any related field. I just know what I like in a courthouse, and that's what I intend to write about. Once upon a time, Lubbock Avalanche-

Journal entertainment editor Bill Kerns and I worked in the same newsroom, so I will borrow his “five-star” rating system: five stars for the best, less than one star for the butt-ugly worst.

So, here are some things I look for in a good West Texas courthouse. First, the courthouse should be easy to find. Ideally, it should be centrally located on the town square. If the courthouse is not located on Main Street or Broadway or First Street, there’s something wrong. Next, there should be good parking for courthouse visitors, with extra points for well-marked, free parking spaces on pavement. Style points will be awarded for horse hitching posts.

The exterior of a courthouse should cry out: “This is The Courthouse! This is the seat of our County Government!” The building should be constructed in a bold style that can be described by architects, like Federal or Neo Gothic. Demerits will be given for post-Walmart or post-Sears-Roebuck designs. The courthouse should be well landscaped, with grass and trees buffering the building from downtown streets. I’m partial to oaks and Bermuda grass, but elms and fescue grass are okay. Pecan trees make beautiful shade and attract cute squirrels. On the other hand, pecan trees attract pesky squirrels and make a mess when the leaves begin to fall. Well-tended flower beds, park benches and other amenities on the courthouse lawn are always appreciated. A significant memorial monument adds to the overall feel of a good county courthouse square.

The entrances and interior of a courthouse should also cry out: “This is The Courthouse! This is the seat of our County Government!” The path to the front door of the courthouse should be majestic, with broad – but not steep – steps leading to the front doors. Inside, there should be lots of marble, with plenty of well-varnished wood trim here and there. Carpet should be used only for improving acoustics, and carpet should never disgrace the walls of a courthouse. Hallways should be wide, and ceilings should be high.

After a long drive to the courthouse, the first thing I usually explore is the restroom. The restroom should be easily accessible, on the first floor of the courthouse, with a big sign advertising its whereabouts. Of course, the restroom should be of adequate size, with appropriate plumbing and other comforts of necessity. A good courthouse restroom should provide a handy place to hang a coat, and a table or counter to temporarily deposit a briefcase or files. Nostalgia points will be awarded to those few courthouses that have maintained their old dormitory-style restrooms with showers, relics of the days when jurors were sequestered overnight and for days at a time.

District courtrooms should be large enough to handle all legal business that might take place there, with room for more than a hundred prospective jurors in high-profile cases. Seating for prospective jurors and other members of the audience should be comfortable, preferably in padded pews. The area before the bar should be wide and deep to accommodate multiparty trials and any kind of demonstrative evidence, with enough

electrical power and accessibility to accommodate all modern electronic tools of the trade. Courtrooms and jury rooms should have lots of windows for natural light, so those inside will not succumb to claustrophobia. Any courtroom that still features a gallery balcony will get special credit.

Meeting rooms should be liberally scattered about the courthouse for conferences with clients, witnesses, or other lawyers, or for a quick box lunch break. A lawyer should not be relegated to doing business in a hallway. Though not the necessity it once was, a well-stocked county law library is appreciated.

I'm sure there are good reasons for the trend in building new jails on the outskirts of town, well away from the courthouse square. However, I'm of the opinion that the jailhouse should be handy to the courthouse, though not necessarily in the same building. I like to be able to visit my incarcerated client, stroll across the street and plead the client's case to a prosecutor, and immediately file papers on the client's behalf so a judge might do what the prosecutor would not.

I admit I am not yet qualified to judge at least one aspect of my quest: courthouse security. I intend to become educated on the subject, because I believe good courthouse security may be the most important aspect of a good courthouse.

A good West Texas courthouse should conjure up a sense of history. The setting should give the impression that great epic battles pitting good against evil were waged here, that great lawyers and jurists once jostled here, that traces of blood and bullet fragments might still exist here, buried deep in the courthouse walls. An old codger associated with the courthouse should be able to recall at least one tall tale about the best trial ever held there.

Finally, it should be a pleasant experience to do business with the day-to-day employees at the courthouse, from the deputy clerks and bailiffs on up to the County Judge, District Judge and the High Sheriff. Judging the people who work at the various West Texas courthouses will be quite subjective and elusive, as will be most of the other qualities of the courthouse that I've described. Nevertheless, somebody with expertise has to do it, and I'm the one.