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The Detailed Beauty of Texas' Courthouses

COURTHOUSES THAT FOLLOW the dictates of Brutalism and Modernistic schools are often indistinguishable from contemporary office buildings. The roots of Brutalism, with all its power and strength, peaked after the end of World War II, when counties that constructed new buildings opted for a physically strong, hardened infrastructure. Around that same time, interests in increasing efficiency led some counties to build Modernistic-style courthouses. Modernistic architecture tended to reject historical influences in favor of increasing function, but many architects still found ways to add physical flair.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMBER NOVAK

Brutalism

Scurry County

After World War II, Texas courthouse architecture shifted from the detailed to the industrial. Pre-fabricated materials, simple form, clean lines, and above all, efficiency became the status quo. One extreme movement in post-war modernist architecture was termed "Brutalism," in reference to its stark form and massiveness. The Scurry County courthouse remodel of 1972, by Joseph D. Hinton, offers a good example of this style.



Originally a 1911 Renaissance Revival edifice, the 1972 remodel completely encased the courthouse in slabs of granite. The project added storage area between the original brick exterior and the new outer shell, as well as about 2,400 square feet of interior floor space.

The Scurry courthouse is constructed with Texas pink granite and white concrete columns. Although far removed relative to detail, the contemporary columns are still indicative of classical Greek and Roman architecture. Concrete, rather than granite, is the typical material used in most Brutalist construction.





Brutalist buildings have few or no windows, because of this the structures are often interpreted as hard and uncompromising.

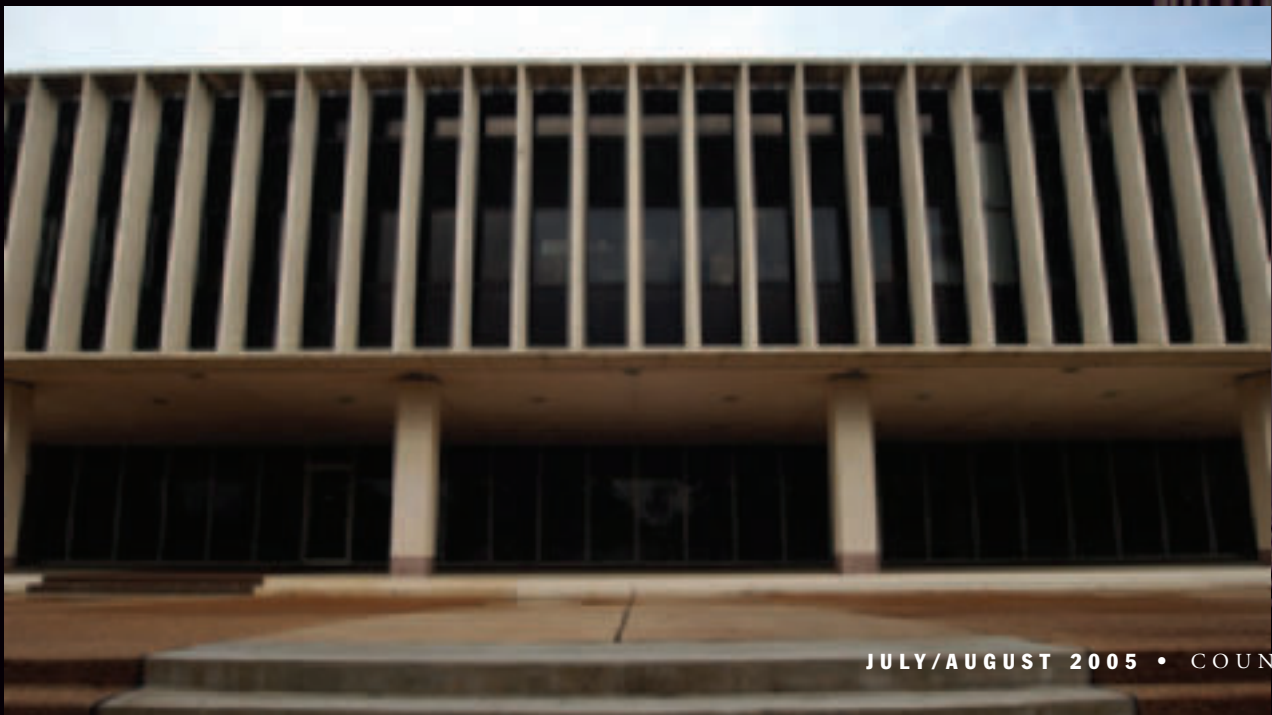


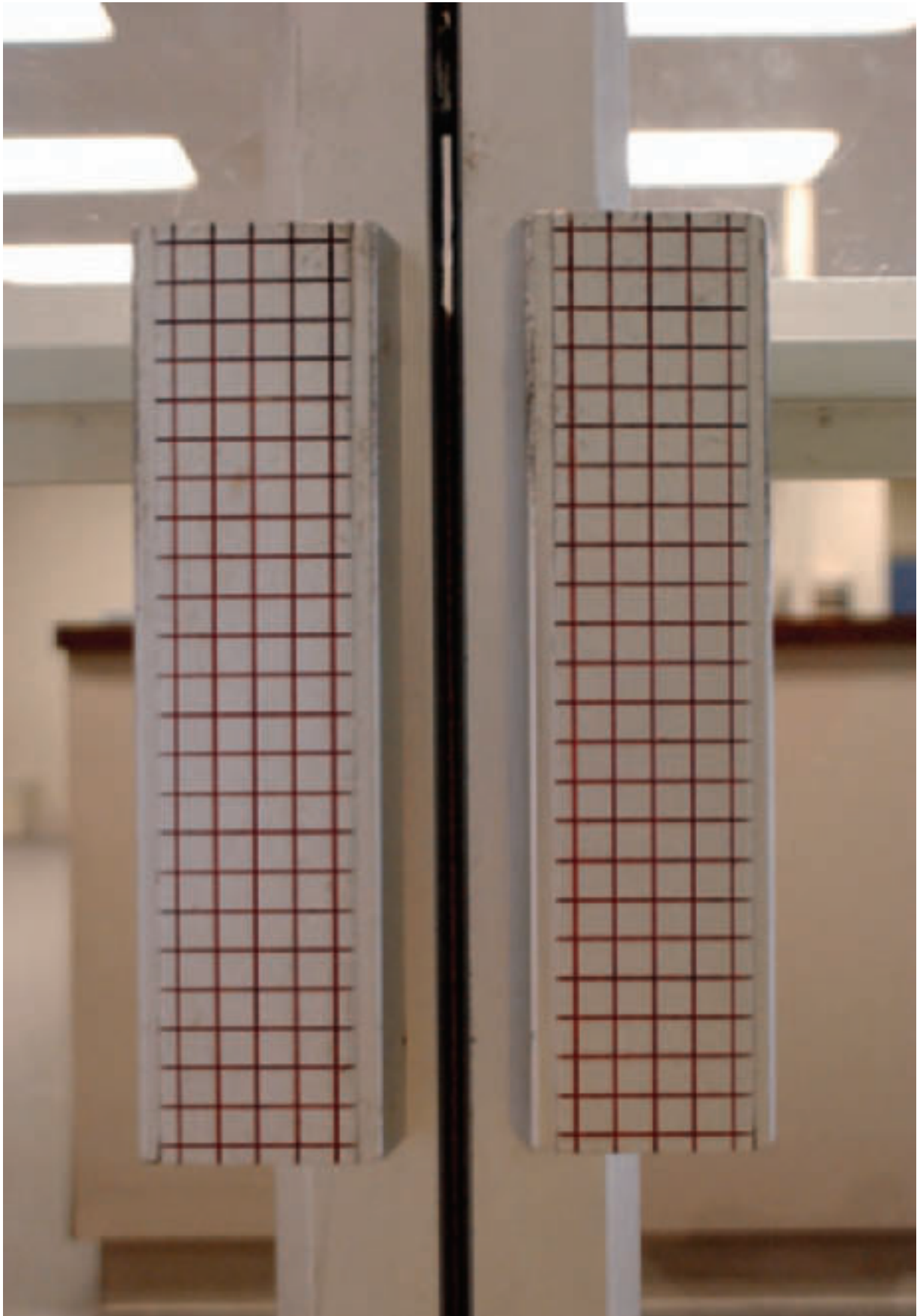
The overall feel of the Modernistic style is massive, with weighty concrete and textured surfaces. In this case, the texture extends to the entire courthouse grounds. As the emphasis of Modernist architecture was on function, it is not surprising that beneath the Matagorda courthouse is an underground parking complex, providing spaces for not only courthouse employees and visitors but also for the local businesses that border the courthouse square.

Modernistic Matagorda County

The trend towards efficient, and economic courthouses dominated the 1960s and 1970s. But in response to criticism that modern architectural styles were uninteresting, architects adopted various strategies of decoration. One popular method was to construct concrete screening on the surface of buildings. Rusty, Marin & Vale's 1965 courthouse in Matagorda County's Bay City did just that.

While built during the same architectural period, the modernistic style exemplified by the Matagorda County courthouse is an obvious departure from the tradition of Brutalism. Concrete is a mainstay of each, but the vertical pattern on the Matagorda courthouse only obscures, rather than replaces, the windows beneath.





The geometric theme used to decorate the Matagorda County courthouse is found both inside and out. The door handles for example are detailed with a grid design.



Another example of geometric design: the staircase is accented with a metal rendition of the building's exterior concrete screening.



Only from the below ground entrance (screened horizontally in keeping with the courthouse's facade) is the parking garage visible. ★