

# FEDERAL COURTHOUSE SQUARE

**Text** John T. O'Connor **Photo** G.E. Kidder Smith

In our April issue, *Tropic* announced an invitational design charrette, the goal of which is to reimagine the William Morgan-designed Federal Courthouse, now deemed obsolete for its original purpose. The group of architects we've chosen to participate in this exercise understand that Morgan's Courthouse Square worked well pre-9/11, its trayed formation and open terraces suggesting an open, transparent democracy in built form. After the events of 9/11 however, the United States clamped down and security became the rallying cry of the decade. So Courthouse Square, as we call it, was quickly locked down, its doors alarmed, its courtyards closed to the public. It no longer made sense as a Federal Court

in an era of mistrust and suspicion.

With this *Tropic*-sponsored charrette our design teams are asked to look past the current use of the courthouse, and suggest ways this impressive structure could be revitalized for a better use.

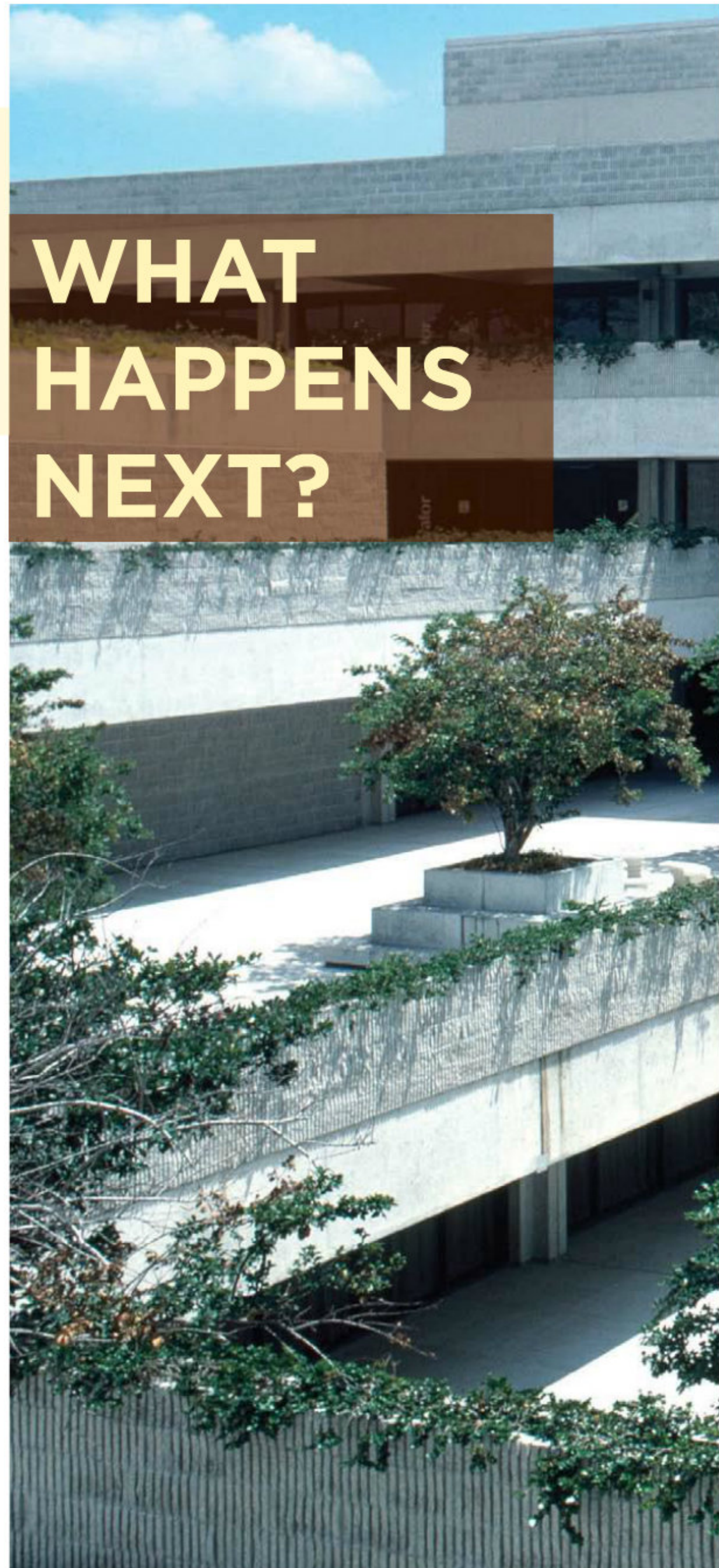
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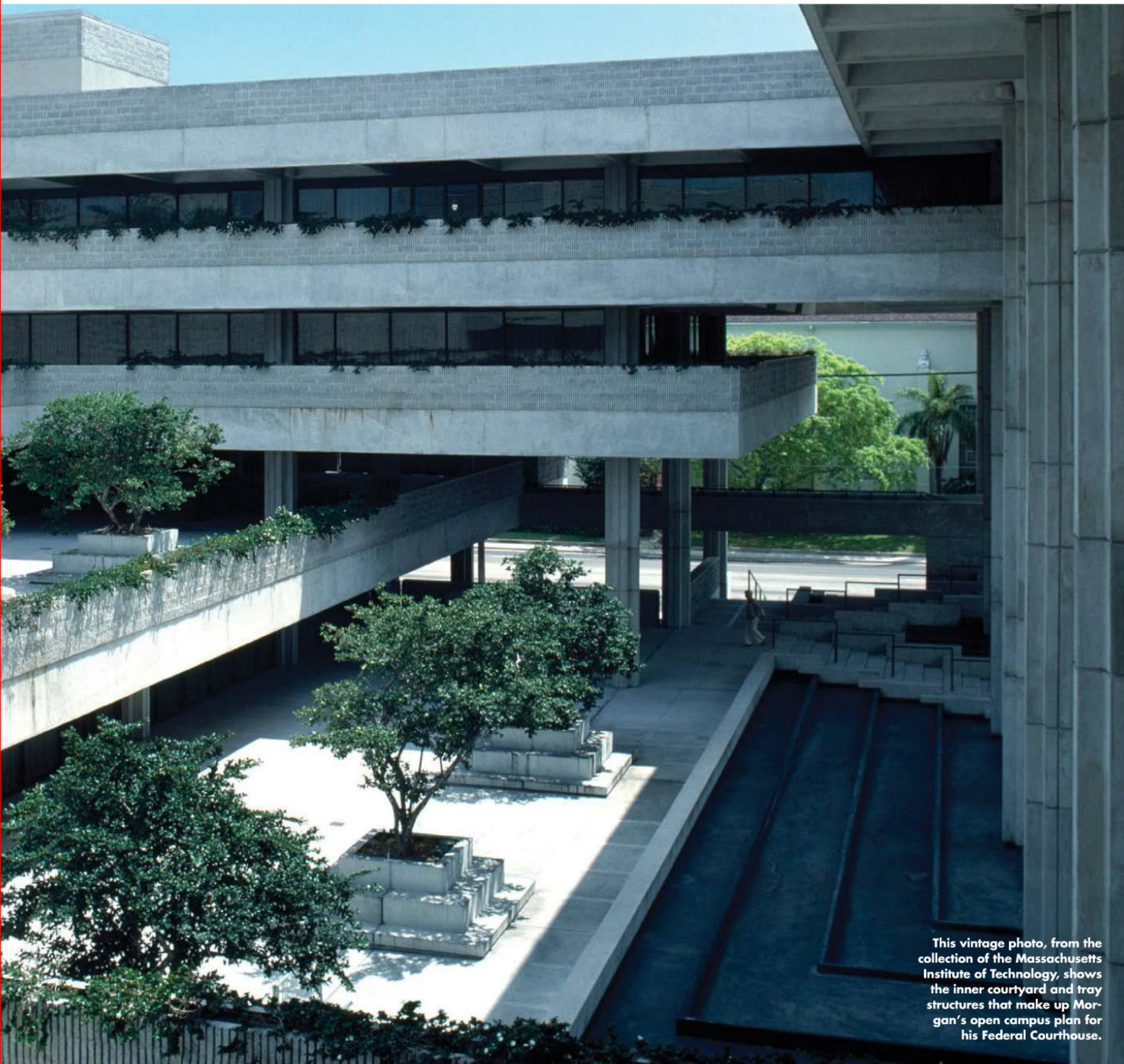
designers are asked to look past its current use, and suggest ways this impressive, Brutalist-era structure could be revitalized for a better use. A charrette is, for those not familiar with the term, an interactive brainstorming session of limited time and sustained concentration, the goal of which is to arrive at the best solution to a problem. The problem here: What to do with a Federal building suffering from deferred maintenance which no longer makes sense for its intended use. Tear it down? Restore it as is? Use a potentially available and contiguous piece of land to expand on the structure making it more financially lucrative? All of these are possible and we leave that to the talent we've brought on to decide.

That talent is substantial. It includes the Touzet Studio, based in Miami; STRANG Architecture, with offices in Miami and Fort Lauderdale; Fort Lauderdale's Glavovic Studio; Cadence, a landscape architecture firm; working in conjunction with Hollywood-based ODP Architects; Adache Group Architects in Fort Lauderdale; and finally, the design firm EDSA, based in Fort Lauderdale.

We're excited they're all on board for this important project, and look forward to publishing the results in our summer, double issue, out in mid-June.

## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?





This vintage photo, from the collection of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, shows the inner courtyard and tray structures that make up Morgan's open campus plan for his Federal Courthouse.

# REIMAGINING COURTHOUSE SQUARE

**Text** John T. O'Connor

**F**ort Lauderdale's Federal Courthouse was built during downtown Fort Lauderdale's first urban renaissance that stretched from the late 1960s through the 1980s. Notable buildings of this period of urban renewal include the City Hall building by William Parrish Plumb and Paul Robin John (1969), the Broward County Main Library by Marcel Breuer Associates (1984), the Broward Center for the Performing Arts (designed in 1989 and completed in 1991) and of course the Federal Courthouse by William Morgan (1979).

While the recently renovated Main Library and Broward Center are going strong, the Federal Courthouse and to a lesser extent the City Hall, no longer fit their original concept. With City Hall, the issue pretty much has to do with size. At the Federal Courthouse, it's more complicated. Morgan's Courthouse was built to reflect the transparency and openness of the American system... to invite people in with its courtyard, open, tray-like terraces and tiered fountain. After 9/11, everything changed. Security was heightened, visitors were shooed away, locks and chain-link were added and the atmosphere changed from that of a great, democratic structure to one closed off by fear.

This year, after decades of deferred maintenance, which led to leaky roofs and health issues, the Federal Government has allocated \$190 million to build a new courthouse, elsewhere in town. This makes Morgan's courthouse — a gem of the Brutalist era — nothing more than surplus.

We at *Tropic* saw this as an opportunity rich with possibilities for an adaptive re-use. One that would keep the original structure, perhaps with changes, perhaps with additions taking over the empty lot to its west. We gave this problem to some great thinkers in the field of architecture and landscape architecture and asked them to work on a solution. Very simply: What would you do and how would you accomplish it? No pesky zoning rules. No worries about acquisition of adjoining properties... Just roll your sleeves up and give it your best shot. And indeed they did. One the following pages (and this month's cover) are proposals from Cadence Landscape Architects, Touzet Studios and Adache Group Architects. Our hope is that these ideas inspire both the building's designation as a landmark, as well as its rebirth as an inviting town square... a destination for decades to come.



**The United States Courthouse in its present state, photographed by Myro Rosky**

# Cādence: The Assembly

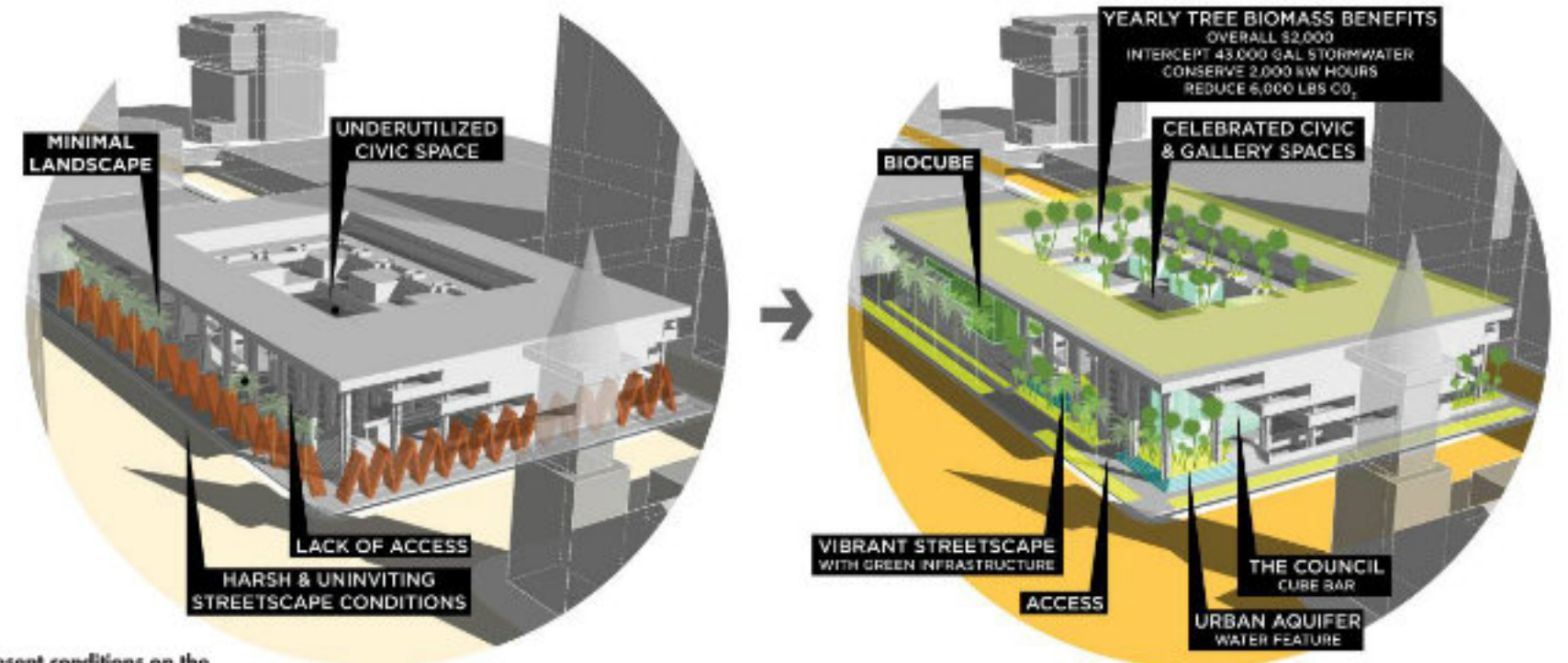
SUN DRENCHED DAYS, rich biodiversity, and constant ocean breezes have always driven the economy of Fort Lauderdale. Yet today's culture has come to overlook the benefits of our unique climate and often forgets how meaningful interactions with nature can be. The present day architecture of our City has closed its walls to the social and natural communities we are all a part of, leaving the city's landscape architecture forgotten and stale.

At the heart of this reality and our City is William Morgan's Federal Courthouse. It stands as a beacon for what was once celebrated and could soon usher a new era for our citizens - one where the intersection of architecture and landscape architecture is honored and where the two perform in unison. Morgan's establishment of Brutalism in South Florida exhibits his response to our tropic climate. He intentionally broke open the sheering walls of this design to welcome the cooling south-eastern winds, and provided a floating canopy supported by "concrete trees" to shelter the public square. Water features underline the central square to minimize vehicular noise, while further cooling the space. Unfortunately, Morgan could not have predicted modern geo-political forces, events, acts of violence and the increased security measures which arose from the ashes of September 11th forever eliminating

the access which once breathed life into this great public square. Consequently, attention has been focused on the interior uses, while our City has watched the outdoor vacuum of this historic structure fall to ruins.

As a direct response to this design challenge, our team, composed of Landscape Architects, has chosen to embrace the landscape and the timeless beauty of Morgan's brutalist work. We have paired the beauty of our regional landscape palette to address the region's complex culture, economy and history of public gathering spaces. We pose these questions - If we revitalize the civic square to its intended use as a public amenity, how can we celebrate this architectural marvel as a cultural asset? How can we utilize the rise of social media to gather groups virtually by providing innovative physical spaces for public messages to not fall on deaf ears?

Through an analysis of existing civic spaces, downtown neighborhood adjacencies and the incorporation of green infrastructure, our team has envisioned a master plan to ultimately relocate the existing Courthouse to an alternative location where it will be part of a larger network of government buildings west of its current home. This allows the design to focus on revital-



Present conditions on the left, and Cadence's vision of what the Courthouse could be, on the right.

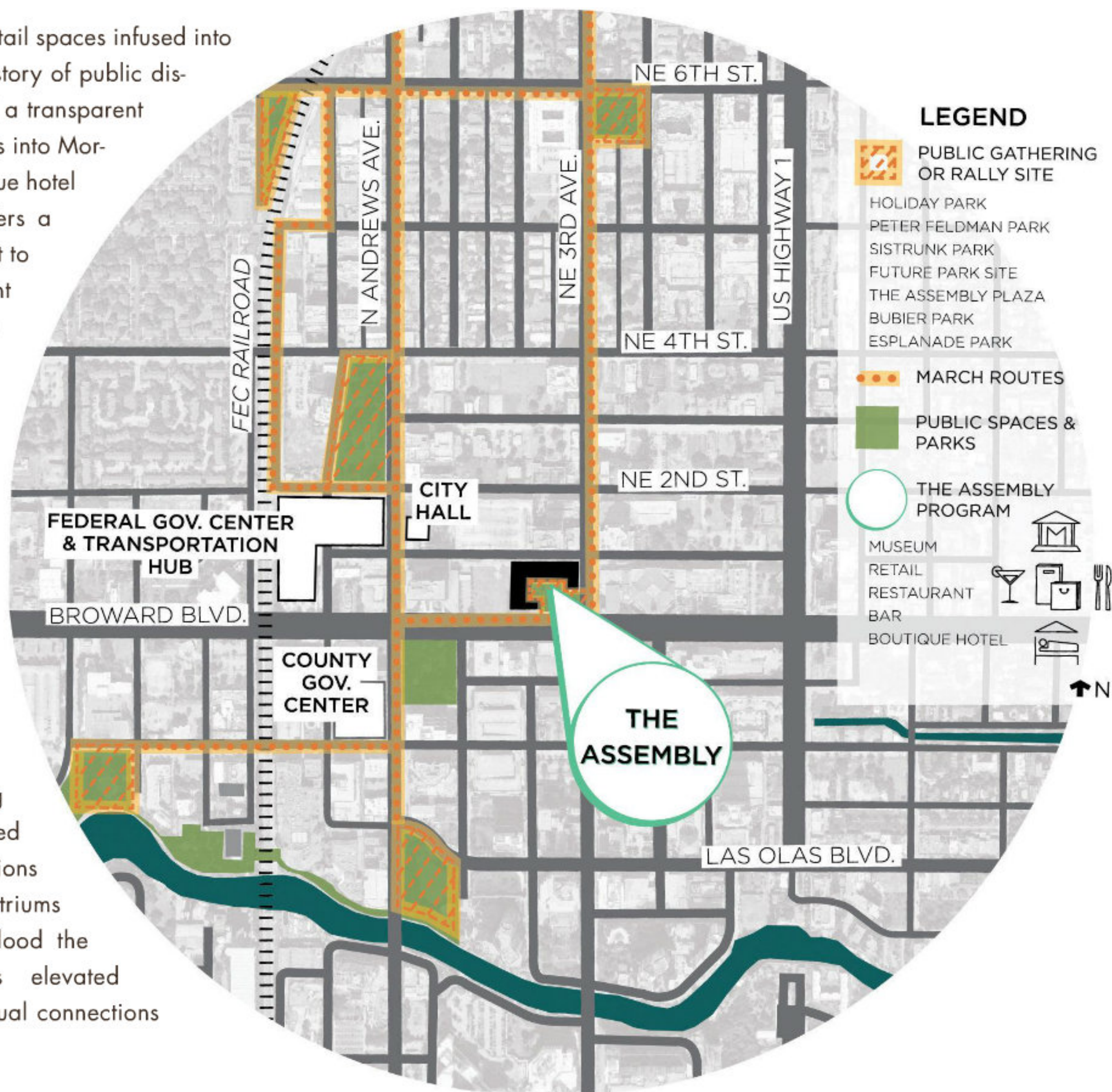


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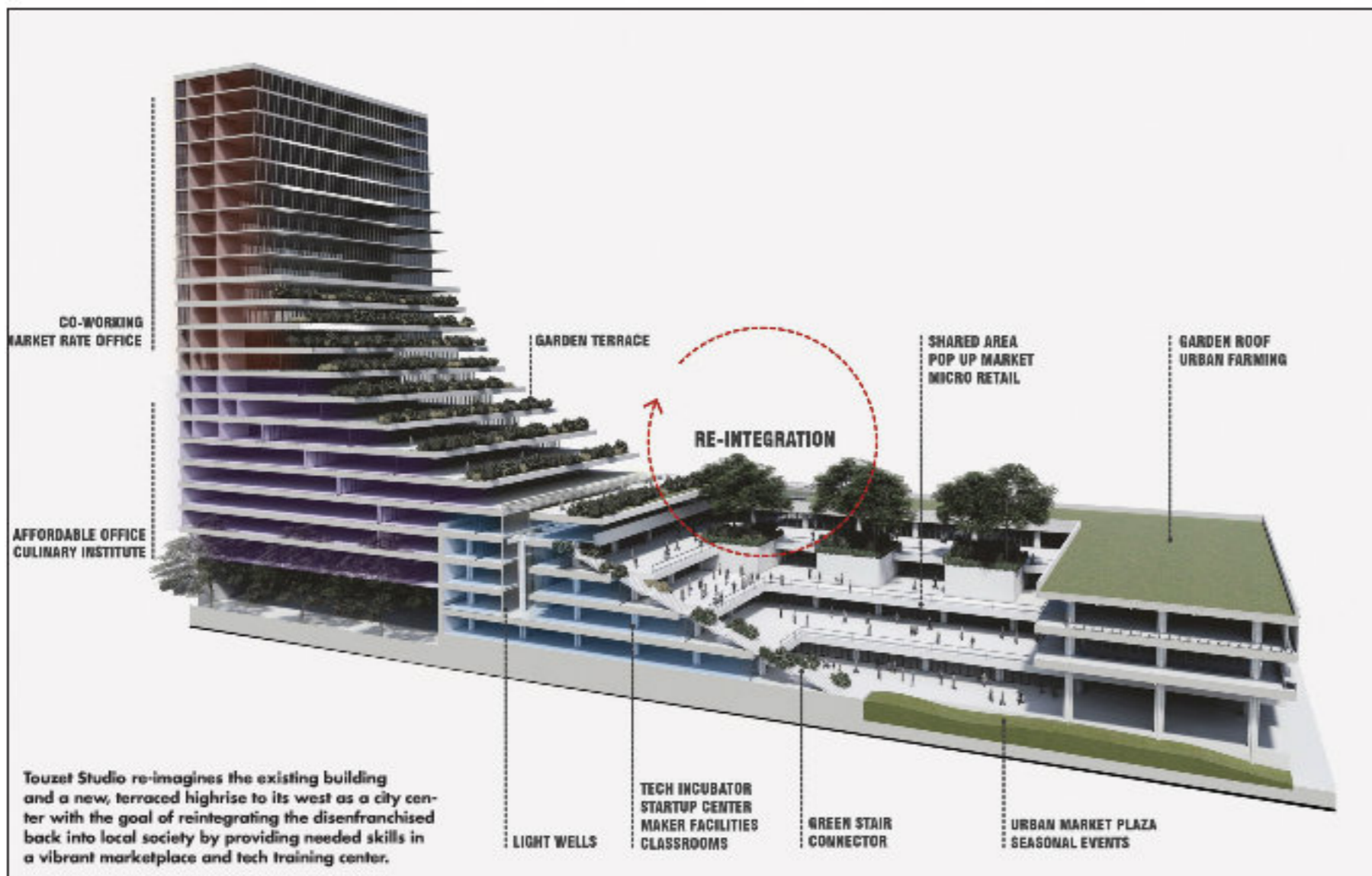
izing the public realm at the existing site and promoting a more impactful assembly space for the City. The space can now become a platform on which the public's voice can physically be seen from the street front. The melding of Architecture with Landscape Architecture represents our past, our present and future — structure and nature resiliently working as one.

The interior architecture will be repurposed into retail spaces infused into a grand Museum to pedagogically exhibit our history of public discourse, current events, environmental justice, and a transparent look at our justice system. An outdoor gallery spills into Morgan's public plaza and outdoor terraces. A boutique hotel dedicated to cultural and art programming offers a unique accommodation for the international tourist to bump into business travelers. The refreshed plant palette will be composed of a native mix from South Floridian plant communities which will sequester pollutants, re-link pollinators and provide sensorial delight for those passing through and using the space. The new cultural attraction will be activated both night and day. The programmatic elements will aim to celebrate the brutal nature of Morgan's concrete fortress by juxtaposing the constant forces of nature and man evolving together.

Through the new architectural materiality added of glass and steel - transparency and strength are symbolized. Augmented to the original massing and modularity of the building are deconstructed cubes, interventions which further amplify the notions of porosity and grandeur. The multistory glass atriums along with publicly accessible glass bridges flood the gallery spaces with sun light, serve as elevated restaurants/lounges, and further enhance the visual connections with the surrounding urban landscape.



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## Re-Integration Center: Mission Redefined

The Federal Courthouse in Fort Lauderdale is an interesting example of brutalist architecture that no longer serves the purpose for which it was designed. When thinking about what a new purpose could be for this powerful building — Touzet Studio thought this would be a rare opportunity for us to consider the highest and best use of the structure to meet society's needs.

## From Federal Courthouse to Re-Integration Center

Our proposal is to re-purpose and transform this building — which was designed to house courtrooms and offices that sometimes led to people's incarceration in Federal Prisons — to a building and Community Center that serves to re-integrate people into society by providing much needed skills and resources to be gainfully employed. Our proposal is to have this former Courthouse dispense another form of justice and become a center for re-integration into society.

We propose keeping the structure largely intact but adding windows facing the courtyard to let light in. We would create a "hub" of activity towards the center, better circulation that connects rooftop gardens above for urban farming and Day care. The corner public space would be re-imagined to be an urban market plaza with pop-up retail and different seasonal events that activate this part of downtown. Adjacent to the Federal Courthouse we propose a Market Rate office tower with co-working spaces and services below.

## Win/Win for Society: Less Crime, Homelessness and additional Tax Revenue

Our view is that society needs more buildings dedicated to serving the needs of people who leave the prison system, or immigrants coming in to the country for the first time, or underemployed who are seeking to generally improve their ability to provide for their families. The fact that there is a significant



homeless population near this site points to the need for such programs. We believe that providing these services within an Adaptive Reuse project allows costs to stay lower than a newly built facility. Combined with a Market Rate Office Tower and Incubation Centers that adds new life and attract young workers would relieve the stigma associated with these programs and further strengthen connections in a healthy society.

## Suggested Uses:

- Incubator and Start Up Center: Training for Tech and other industries
- Maker Facilities — for creatives or those interested in developing new products the deep floor plates and less expensive adaptive reuse SF is ideal.
- Culinary Institute and Urban Farming – train people in food service with a focus on healthy, fresh food preparation, farming and nutrition
- Mental Health and Drug Counseling

- Legal Aid
- Day Care
- Education Public/Private Partnerships- Courtrooms can become classrooms. Deep spaces not well suited for today's courtrooms are perfect for incubators and training facilities.
- Micro Retail to sell products and F&B serve as small outposts for startup businesses

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