

# A Romanesque Rebirth

by J. Brantley Hightower, AIA

**Project** Comal County Courthouse, New Braunfels

**Client** Comal County

**Architect** Volz & Associates

**Design team** Tere O'Connell, AIA; Tracy Hirschman Hutson; Candace M. Volz; John R. Volz, AIA

**Photographer** Brian Mihealsick; Brantley Hightower, AIA

On a crisp morning in January, several hundred citizens of Comal County gathered to celebrate the opening of their courthouse. Once the crowd assembled, several dignitaries spoke, a ribbon was cut, and a cannon was fired.

This description could be used to recount two separate but related events. The first occurred in 1899, when the county celebrated the opening of its new courthouse designed by James Riely Gordon. The second happened in the same place on the same date 114 years later, when a group assembled in New Braunfels to celebrate the end of a nearly decade-long effort to restore the county's historic courthouse building to its pristine former glory.

The Comal County Courthouse was one of Gordon's last contributions to a remarkable series of courthouse designs that were based on a unique cruciform plan. Built of locally quarried limestone, the courthouse exists as a restrained but robust interpretation by Gordon of the Richardsonian Romanesque style.

It is ironic that one of the greatest dangers to the survival of a courthouse is the growth and prosperity of the county it serves. As Comal County expanded in population, so too did the demands placed upon its courthouse building. In 1931, a jail facility was added to the building's north side, and the district courtroom was significantly expanded. In 1952, the County Clerk's office was similarly expanded, and in 1966, the previously enlarged district courtroom was subdivided into two separate floors. Although these additions were constructed using masonry similar to that of the original building, interior alterations were much less sympathetic. Original finishes were removed or covered with contemporary paneling, carpet, and lay-in ceilings, while years of deferred maintenance





and a century's worth of wear and tear had significantly compromised the integrity of the structure. For the Comal County Courthouse to survive, it needed a radical intervention.

**Volz & Associates**, an Austin firm specializing in historic preservation and traditional design, first met with Comal County officials in September of 2003. They were charged with preparing a cost/benefit analysis comparing a county-funded remodeling effort with a complete restoration under the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program (THCPP). Funded by the Texas Legislature and operated by the Texas Historic Commission (THC), the THCPP provides matching state funds to counties performing restoration projects that meet the Commission's rigorous preservation standards.

Although the county's leadership was initially split on which of the two alternatives was preferable, for County Commissioner Jan Kennady the full restoration was the only real option. "I could never imagine not restoring

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the courthouse," she said. "The Comal County community has always preserved its history, and the courthouse sits at the heart of that heritage." Her position won the day, when the analysis revealed that with a state grant, the cost of a full restoration would be equivalent to a much less-ambitious effort paid for entirely by the county. The commissioners again contracted Volz & Associates to prepare the requisite master plan, which was approved by the THC in 2005. Grants are awarded to proposed projects with approved master plans based on a number of factors, including the merit of the project and the amount of funds allocated to the THCPP by the state legislature. The Comal County project was not granted fund-



**Previous spread** *The newly restored Comal County Courthouse serves as a powerful reminder of the civic pride of both the leaders who built it in 1899 and those who chose to preserve it over a century later.*

**This page** *Sitting just off the Main Plaza in central New Braunfels, the courthouse today acts as both the symbolic and political center of the region.*

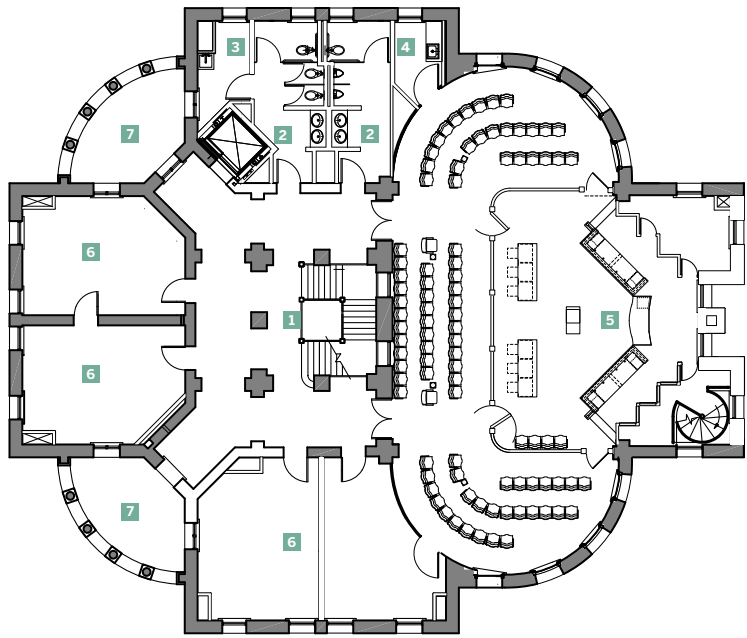


**Clockwise from top** *The district courtroom was reconstructed by studying historic photographs and other courthouses designed by the architect. The rose, yellow, and blue hues that defined the building's interior colors were determined through the analysis of historic paint samples found in the building. Period photographs illustrate how the district courtroom was originally configured as well as how the space was utilized during court proceedings.*

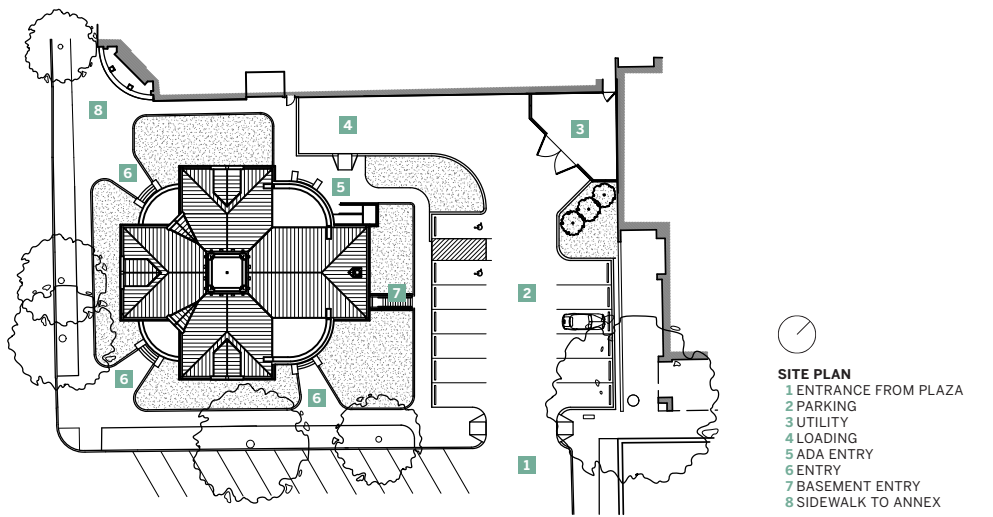


HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY SOPHIEBURG MUSEUM & ARCHIVES, NEW BRAUNFELS.

The original limestone masonry was fully restored giving the building a crisp intensity at the rededication on January 22, 2013. The removal of a 1931 addition allowed the courthouse's northeastern facade to be restored to its original configuration. The pattern of the encaustic clay tiles was based on an original fragment discovered in one of the courthouse's entry porches.



- SECOND FLOOR**
- 1 CORRIDOR & STAIR
  - 2 RESTROOM
  - 3 SERVICE
  - 4 BREAK ROOM
  - 5 COURTROOM
  - 6 OFFICE
  - 7 BALCONY



- SITE PLAN**
- 1 ENTRANCE FROM PLAZA
  - 2 PARKING
  - 3 UTILITY
  - 4 LOADING
  - 5 ADA ENTRY
  - 6 ENTRY
  - 7 BASEMENT ENTRY
  - 8 SIDEWALK TO ANNEX

ing until its second application in 2009. After receiving the \$3,438,330 grant from the THCPP, work began on the restoration of the Comal County Courthouse in March of 2011.

In addition to the full replacement of systems and restoration of the masonry, the project called for the demolition of the three significant additions made to the courthouse, and reconstruction of the significantly altered district courtroom. Great care was taken to protect the original building while at the same time preserving the stone removed from the additions. This was done so that the masonry could be used to reconstruct the original north wall that had been removed in 1931. Slurry that had been allowed to coat parts of the exterior masonry sandwiched in between

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the original building and the additions had to be painstakingly removed by hand. Carved capitals and other details destroyed during earlier additions had to be recreated by skilled contemporary craftsmen.

Ultimately, it was the reconstruction of the district courtroom that represented the most remarkable part of the preservation effort. This was the most extensively compromised space, and essentially none of its original finishes remained. Only three photographs were known to exist that documented the space's original condition, so everything from the configuration of the balcony to the arched proscenium behind the judge's bench had to be recreated by studying details from these images. Details such as the wallpaper banding, lighting, furnishings, and railing were recreated in this way as well.

While most of the district courtroom had to be reconstructed, a few original elements were returned to the space. The judge's bench had become part of the New Braunfels Conservation Society's collection but was loaned to the county so that it could be reinstalled in its former location. An original transom that once capped one of the courthouse's four entrances was also reinstalled, after having spent many years in the dining room of a local restaurant.

Historic photographs are invaluable resources, but when it comes to the recreation of original color schemes, they are much less helpful. For the Comal County Courthouse, Volz & Associates analyzed aged original

paint samples that revealed a surprisingly vivid palette of rose, yellow, and blue hues that defined the building's interior.

**One unexpected surprise** revealed during selective early demolition was that original encaustic and geometric clay tile could still be found at one of the building's entry porches under a thick layer of concrete. This fragment was used to create reproductions that render accurately the original design intent. Gordon appears to have used the tile as the inspiration for the original paint finishes, as all of the historic colors found in the forensic paint analysis proved to be complementary to those in the discovered tile fragments.

More mundane, but no less critical, was the work done to update the mechanical systems of the courthouse. The heating and air conditioning system was tightly packed into the building's attic and crawl spaces so that as much of the original floor plate as possible could be occupied by usable space. A fire-suppression sprinkler system was added to improve life safety, and elevator and accessibility ramps were updated.

The restoration of the Comal County Courthouse illustrates that preservation is about much more than the mere repointing of masonry and replacement of rotted wood. It is a creative act that requires architects to inhabit the minds of past members of the profession while providing for the functional needs of this day and age. This can take time, but the end results speak for themselves.

"People became more and more exited as the project progressed," said Commissioner Kennady. Even before the county had moved into the restored building, residents and visitors alike were already inquiring about tours. This community pride comes in addition to the jobs that are created and the boost that downtown businesses routinely receive when a courthouse is restored. What is more, the citizens of Comal County now have a powerful reminder of the ambition their forbearers had for their community and of the respect for that heritage that defines who they are today.

J. Brantley Hightower, AIA, is the founder of HiWorks in San Antonio.