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LEE COUNTY ADMINISTRATION

Gundersen Wilson Architects

1960



image courtesy of: City of Fort Myers



photo: Joyce Owens

The Lee County Administration Building is one of a small handful in downtown Ft Myers with "strong architectural merit," according to famed urbanist Andrés Duany, designer of Fort Myers' downtown master plan.

Inspired by German architect Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building completed just two years earlier in New York City, the Lee County Administration Building incorporates curtain-wall technology but is adapted to the climate of South Florida by adding a horizontal trellis-like sunshade and operable windows. As buildings grew taller, thick bearing walls could no longer support them, as they had been since buildings were constructed. Columns now had to bear the weight of floors above, with thin walls of metal, glass, or stone hung from the structural frame like "curtains" – a technique evolved around 1900 from experimental buildings in Europe and later, from skyscrapers in Chicago.

Today the building stands as a fine representative of the local movement of architectural style. There is much to learn from this building with its long shallow floor plan that allows for natural cross ventilation and abundant natural daylight - able to function without air conditioning in a power outage.

The architects took a keen interest in local materials and their longevity and durability. Constructed of common materials—concrete, steel, glass, local brick and keystone - very much in keeping with the methodology of the Sarasota School of Architecture, both the Administration Building and the Inter County Telephone & Telegraph headquarters designed by the same architects a year later, use durable local materials and are standing the test of time well in a harsh climate with very little maintenance.

The partially glazed main entrance juts out from the building to meet the sidewalk, carrying the sunshades overtop. Admirably, this simple, yet functional entry piece emphasizes the building's relationship with Second Street, while the rest of the ground floor is set back from the street and allowing it to be shaded by plantings.

In the early years the public did not sympathetically receive the Lee County Administration Building. They thought it was too modern and claimed the horizontal trellis looked train-like, a pigeon roost, or thought the contractor had forgotten to take down the scaffolding.

For architects Gundersen & Wilson, it would become their largest public building and a masterwork. Today, it sits slightly taller (two stories were added) and slightly trimmed (the sunshades were removed off the East and West facades), but not vastly different from its original form. Even if not so cherished in its own day, finally, the Administration Building has been recognized as one of Fort Myers' most elegant and regionally appropriate buildings.



photo: Joyce Owens



photo: Joshua Colt Fisher