

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-106139](#), a report to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 1994, GSA has commissioned designs for 153 buildings as part of the Design Excellence Program, GSA's program for the creative design of new buildings and building modernizations for federal agencies. GSA also commissions site-specific artwork for these projects, as part of the Art in Architecture Program.

GAO was asked to review issues related to the Design Excellence and Art in Architecture Programs.

This report (1) describes the requirements and guidance that govern the programs; (2) describes GSA's processes for designing new federal buildings and renovations and commissioning art installations under the programs; and (3) assesses the role of community input in the Design Excellence Program.

GAO reviewed executive orders, statutes, regulations, policies, and other documentation for the programs. GAO also interviewed GSA officials and outside architects. GAO assessed Design Excellence Program policies on community input against the *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that GSA update the Design Excellence Manual to include requirements for obtaining and considering community input on building design, including architectural style. GSA concurred with the recommendation and said it would develop a plan to address it.

View [GAO-23-106139](#). For more information, contact Catina Latham at (202) 512-2834 or lathamC@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL REAL PROPERTY

GSA Should Include Community Input Requirements to Help Fulfill Design Excellence Program Goals

What GAO Found

The General Services Administration (GSA) commissions the design of federal buildings and accompanying site-specific artwork through the Design Excellence Program and Art in Architecture Program, respectively. Program requirements are generally located in GSA policy, and not in statute. In 2020, both programs were subject to executive orders—now rescinded—that directed GSA to preference classical architecture and avoid abstract art, among other things. This was a departure from prior GSA policy to avoid federal style mandates. The executive orders were in place for a short time, and GSA has returned to its prior policies. However, GSA officials said that since each program's requirements are largely located in GSA policy, GSA could be required to accommodate future executive orders that identify style preferences, which they said could conflict with program goals and complicate compliance with historic preservation laws.

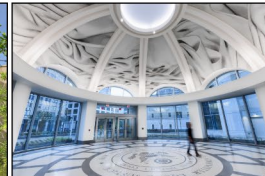
GSA Design Excellence Program and Art in Architecture Program Projects



Nathaniel R. Jones Federal Building and Courthouse, 2002, Youngstown, OH



John M. Roll Courthouse, 2013, Yuma, AZ



The Robes of Justitia, 2021 (Fred D. Thompson Federal Building and US Courthouse, Nashville, TN)



Community, 1989 (Joseph P. Addabbo Federal Building, Queens, NY)

Source: General Services Administration (GSA). | GAO-23-106139

Both the Design Excellence Program and Art in Architecture Program follow three-phase processes to select a firm or artist and approve a final design. For each program, GSA: (1) develops a solicitation that includes the project's requirements and evaluation criteria, such as past experience; (2) identifies a short list of qualified applicants and then a final awardee; and (3) collaborates with the awardee to identify an appropriate design for the project. In addition, both programs rely on the use of selection panels comprised of GSA officials, industry representatives, and others to review applications and designs.

While GSA recognizes the value of community engagement in its Design Excellence Manual, it does not require community input on building design. For example, the Design Excellence Manual identifies coordinating planning and design decisions with the local community as a goal. However, the Design Excellence Manual does not require the commissioned architect to obtain and consider community input on building design. GSA officials said they did not want to be prescriptive regarding how architects should obtain and consider community input on building design because project circumstances vary and the architect is the design expert. However, GSA could establish community input requirements that still give architects the latitude to decide whether and how to integrate the input. Having such requirements would help GSA achieve its objectives of integrating buildings into the local community and incorporating regional architectural traditions. In addition, collecting such input could reduce the potential for schedule overruns due to local opposition to building designs.