

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-420](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 1994, GSA has spent more than \$8 billion to construct 78 new federal buildings through its Design Excellence program. Some design choices can affect a building's O&M costs and functionality.

GAO was asked to review GSA's ability to manage O&M costs under the Design Excellence program. This report assesses the extent to which: (1) GSA's design choices affect O&M costs; (2) GSA considers O&M costs and functionality when planning and designing buildings; and (3) GSA systematically collects and shares information on O&M costs.

GAO conducted a web-based survey of building managers for the 78 Design Excellence buildings. GAO also visited 10 Design Excellence buildings in three GSA regions selected based on several factors, including geographic and agency diversity. GAO reviewed GSA documents, and interviewed GSA officials and building tenants. Information obtained through site visits and interviews is not generalizable.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to update existing GSA procedures for planning and designing new buildings to: (1) estimate full O&M costs; (2) obtain information from personnel responsible for addressing the O&M consequences of design decisions; (3) further consider how design choices may affect building functionality; and (4) systematically collect and share lessons from existing buildings. GSA agreed with these recommendations.

View [GAO-18-420](#). For more information, contact Lori Rectanus at (202) 512-2834 or rectanusl@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL BUILDINGS

More Consideration of Operations and Maintenance Costs Could Better Inform the Design Excellence Program

What GAO Found

The goals of the General Services Administration's (GSA) Design Excellence Program are to creatively design federal buildings that meet federal agencies' functional needs and become public landmarks. Some design choices for Design Excellence buildings have decreased ongoing operations and maintenance (O&M) costs, but others have increased those costs. GSA's building managers and tenants told GAO that design choices that have reduced O&M costs include the use of durable materials and low maintenance landscaping. Other design choices have increased O&M costs. For example, according to GAO's survey of 78 building managers of Design Excellence buildings, multistory atriums often led to additional O&M costs, including the need to erect expensive scaffolding for maintenance.

Atriums That Increased Operations and Maintenance Costs in Buildings Constructed under GSA's Design Excellence Program, according to Respondents



(Left to right) First Street Federal Courthouse (Los Angeles, CA); Ronald Reagan Building and Trade Center (Washington, D.C.); James M. Carter & Judith N. Keep U.S. Courthouse (San Diego, CA)

Source: GAO. | GAO-18-420

While GSA aims to create Design Excellence buildings that are cost-effective and functional, it makes design choices without fully considering their effect on O&M costs and functionality. For example, GSA officials do not estimate the majority of O&M costs, such as the building maintenance associated with their design choices until the design is almost finalized. This outcome is partly because GSA procedures do not direct GSA officials to develop such estimates during the design and planning of Design Excellence buildings and because building and regional managers responsible for addressing the O&M consequences are also not involved in the design and planning process. As a result, important cost information that could help building project teams make the most cost-effective design choices is not available to help them. In addition, while building managers GAO surveyed reported that GSA's design choices generally support a building's functionality, they also reported that some design choices increased O&M costs without improving functionality. For example, they identified design choices related to material color and lighting that increased O&M costs but did not enhance the functionality of the building for the tenants.

Although GSA has developed some information on how design choices can affect O&M costs, it does not consistently collect and share such information. For example, GSA has evaluated the performance of only six Design Excellence buildings, and does not systematically collect information on how design choices have affected O&M costs in all existing buildings. Without a process to collect and share such information, future buildings may not benefit from these lessons, and problematic choices may be repeated.