



A Place of Dignity and Decorum: Why Physical Space Matters in Building a Better Bond Court

Within 72 hours of arrest in Cook County, individuals in custody are required to appear before a judge, who sets conditions of release or detention. If detained, the individual will await trial in the County's jail. Most of these hearings take place in Central Bond Court, Room 100 at 26th and California. As many as 100 defendants appear before a judge every day in hearings that last an average of only 37 seconds each.

The decisions made in Room 100 during those short seconds have enormous impact on the people who appear in bond court. Even brief stays in jail can mean that a person misses school, loses their job or housing, and weakens ties to their community—all making it harder to reenter society once released. People who are detained are four times more likely to be sentenced to prison than those accused of similar charges, and they receive prison sentences that are three times longer than those who await trial in the community on similar charges.

Creating a Model Bond Court

Since 2014, the Cook County Criminal Justice System Stakeholders—the Chief Judge, the State's Attorney, the Public Defender, the Clerk of the Court, the Sheriff, and the County Board President—have been working with the support of Civic Consulting Alliance to reform Bond Court. Their ultimate goal is to reduce Cook County's jail population while advancing public safety. This work has included improvements to the bond court processes; a new risk assessment tool to give judges better information about detainees' suitability for release; mental health screening and referral; and enhanced training for public defenders. So far, these reforms have helped decrease the average daily jail population from an average of 10,000 people detained every day to fewer than 8,000 today, a reduction of more than 20%.

Despite these successes, fully reforming bond court requires more than just better information and processes. The physical configuration of bond court is also essential to holding effective proceedings. The Stakeholders have long believed that improving the physical environment of the courtroom could provide better organization and engagement among crucial groups, such as judges, public defenders, prosecutors, and detainees, which would in turn result in better decision-making about whom to detain or release.

Research and Analysis

In the summer of 2016, Civic Consulting Alliance convened a pro bono team to assess the challenges of bond court's physical space and what could be done to address them. The team included architects and design specialists from CannonDesign and a summer fellow from the Kellogg School of Management. The team began an eight-week process of research, analysis, and solution-design to enhance the physical space of bond court.

During the first phase of the project, the team spoke with more than 30 people across 10 stakeholder groups, including previous detainees who provided a unique perspective on the impact of the physical spaces. The team spent time in bond court, observing the proceedings, monitoring traffic flow, acoustics, and body language. The team also visited the bond court at the Skokie Courthouse in Northern Cook County, which was identified by many stakeholders as a model configuration.

Over

Challenges Identified

By the end of their examination, the team identified several challenges that resulted in a loud, crowded room, where those in the audience have difficulty hearing and the judge has difficulties getting the information needed to make fair decisions.

- **Built environment:** Judges and families were both affected by the chaotic, confusing hearing atmosphere of the courtroom. The flow of the room created bottlenecks of traffic, including court personnel unrelated to the proceedings passing through to access other parts of the courthouse. The discussions between the judge and lawyers were concentrated in one quarter of the room, and sightlines were often obstructed. Pretrial Services, a crucial part of the bond court process, was located far from the judge, making it difficult for the judge to get the necessary information to make a decision.
- **Organization of the proceedings:** Disorganization within the courtroom drove interruptions and inefficiencies during the hearings. Bond court relies on a flurry of papers and forms exchanged by the multiple agencies involved in the proceedings, but the work spaces and file systems were confining and inadequate, leading to mistakes and interruptions among the agencies and uninformed decision-making by judges.
- **Acoustics:** Participants in the hearing were often distracted by incidental noise in the room itself, as well as noise emanating from adjacent rooms through four connecting doors in the courtroom, making it difficult to work effectively, and conveying a lack of professionalism and decorum. Even the position of the judge's bench blocked attorneys' voices.
- **Access to information:** Families often lacked the necessary information to understand the process and purpose of bond court, to follow the proceedings, and to know who was in the room and what their function was. This confusion led to distrust and additional stress over a detained individual's fate.

Solution Design

To address these issues, the team developed several potential solutions to reconfigure the room, sightlines, acoustics, and workflows. The team presented its designs to the Criminal Justice Stakeholders, and, after careful consideration, the stakeholders approved a full redesign. The new design adopts the configuration of a traditional courtroom with modern innovations to address all of identified challenges.

- **Built environment:** The redesign lays out the courtroom on a formal axis with clear sightlines, strong acoustics, and simple flow of information and people. The new arrangement is flexible and accommodate all the agencies, including Pretrial Services, as to minimize movement in front of the bench, allowing families and judges alike to hear and understand important information.
- **Organization of the proceedings:** The new layout allows agencies to more easily manage paper files and have adequate work surfaces, improving their ability to communicate necessary information to judges and judges' ability to make decisions. The new courtroom also adds power outlets and internet connectivity to each workstation in preparation for future electronic systems.
- **Acoustics:** A pallet of new materials—such as carpet, wood, wall panels, wallcovering, and paint—allows the participants can speak and be heard without yelling. Better acoustics improve the transmission of information crucial to decision-making and convey the seriousness of the proceedings.
- **Access to information:** The redesigned courtroom provides better access to much needed information, such as clear visual cues to indicate public seating and agencies' roles. Hallway signage explains the bond court process and how families should participate, incorporating the same language and symbols used in the handout that families receive in bond court.

Next Steps

Since the Stakeholders approved the design, the County has begun working on capital estimates, and construction is planned to begin in late 2017.

Recognition

In March of 2017, the project was recognized by Fast Company as one of twelve "World Changing Ideas of 2017" out of more than 1,000 entries focused on using innovation to make the world a better place.