

State Lawmakers Choose Style Over Security for Capitol Annex Project

Commentary by Michael Leighton

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If we've learned anything from the January 6 insurrection, it's that we can't take security for granted. Unfortunately, it seems state lawmakers do not share that same sentiment. Why? Because they're planning to build a new glass Capitol building with multiple weak spots, in stark contrast to all other state Capitols.

As a former Marine, current architect, and long-time Californian, I have concerns.

While there's quite some irony that the convoluted Capitol Annex Project is destined to end with a "crystal palace," that's not where my concerns lie. They lie in the fact that no legislator or architect involved in the project discussed how an all-glass exterior poses security risks for state employees.

In these turbulent times when we are routinely reading news reports of attacks on our schools and government buildings, many in the architectural profession choose to increase our facilities' security capacities to ensure the safety of our children and government workers. If it were up to us and security were the primary goal of the facility, we would put the buildings in an underground silo with only one entrance and exit. Considering most people would balk at all state facilities being built underground, we as architects must strike a balance between a fortress and a primarily glass structure with numerous access points, the latter of which is what is being proposed for the new Capitol Annex.



Proposed redesign of the Capitol Annex with an all-glass exterior. Image provided by Perry Communications Group, Inc.

Short of cladding the structure in ballistic glazing, which is cost prohibitive, a glass exterior provides ample opportunity for foul play. Without any exterior walls, like the current granite and plaster walls of the Capitol and Annex buildings which block small arms rounds, the occupants near the exterior are unable to take cover from possible gun fire. In addition, all-glass walls would disclose the internal movement of law enforcement, such as escorting a high-ranking State leader to safety, as any efforts inside the building would be exposed to the attacker's view outside the building.



The proposed Capitol Annex would include new glass features with multiple weak spots surrounding the Capitol building. Image provided by Perry Communications Group, Inc.

As we saw from the January 6 attack, the ability to immediately seek effective cover saves lives while law enforcement tries to get the situation in hand. Outside of the all-glass concerns, lawmakers are also planning to wrap the proposed Annex basement with a parking garage on three sides. This, too, poses security risks. Not only from vehicular laden bombs, but from aerosol toxic agents which could be released into the building through the parking garage, agents such as those used in the 1995 Tokyo subway attacks.

If you look at State Capitols around the country, you'll find some similarities – they're sturdy, tough buildings made out of materials such as marble, sandstone, granite, or brick. Why? Because the architects involved in each Capitol's creation knew that a state's legislative hub needs to be regal, functional and, most importantly, safe. Even today, the California State Capitol stands firmly with its Neo-Classical style; why would we weaken her by attaching a delicate glass building to the back?

Clearly, our lawmakers have forgotten about the 2001 incident where a semi-truck rammed into the south steps of the Capitol causing a large fire and \$13.5 million in damages. And we know that the cost of the repairs from the January 6 attack has already exceeded \$1 million, primarily from busted doors and smashed windows – could you imagine how bad the damage would have been if the U.S. Capitol were made of glass instead of stone, marble, and iron?

California’s lawmakers are choosing a trendy design over the safety of staff and the millions of visitors who tour the Capitol each year.

It’s time to stop this wasteful, and now, dangerous project.

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