Meet Les Shepherd, new chief architect of the U.S. General Services Administration.

"Never a dull moment," Shepherd says on a December afternoon, acknowledging the demands of a job he held unofficially from January 2005, when his legendary predecessor, Edward A. Feiner, stepped down, until late November, when his appointment was announced.

On the day we meet, Shepherd, 49, is dressed in shades of gray. While Feiner stood out in cowboy boots, Shepherd's 6-foot-tall frame is anchored by black lace-ups. ("I have eight pairs of the exact same shoes," he says.)

The previous week had proved more challenging than most. Down the gleaming white corridor, itself a model of federal design, jurors had been winnowing entries for the 11th round of the Design Excellence Awards. The best courthouses, federal buildings, border stations, renovations, and art commissions will be honored on March 29. "I can say I personally touched half of those," Shepherd says. "I hope each project is better for it."

That same week, Shepherd also held a daylong, get-acquainted session with Thomas Gordon Smith, a classical architect who teaches at Notre Dame. Widely rumored as the agency's choice for the top job, Smith was
appointed to a federal architecture fellowship instead. Shepherd says he welcomes the "additional perspective."

In lieu of a peace pipe, the two hatched a plan for an autumn symposium on style. The working title is "Form and Meaning in Federal Architecture." The steering committee starts with traditionalists Alan Greenberg, Hugh Hardy, and Robert A.M. Stern. Shepherd quickly characterizes the effort as a natural sequel to a 1990s symposium on modernism. He waves a copy of the final report. Its silver-gray cover perfectly matches his Richard Meier–designed watch.

After 18 years at the GSA, Les Shepherd exudes the practiced confidence of an Olympic gymnast on the balance beam. If there is a storm brewing between classicists and progressives, he makes it clear that he will be the voice of calm.

"There isn't a style; no one has predetermined anything," he says. "We're always going to be looking for the best design talent. There's just not a single solution."

Growing up in Mississippi, Texas, and New Mexico, Shepherd envisioned himself as an artist, but he abandoned the idea after hearing too many "starving artist" stories.

He set his sights on architecture while attending junior high in a thin-shelled concrete structure that reminds him of work by Bruce Goff. After earning a degree from Texas Tech, he worked on the adaptive reuse of a high school in Albuquerque, N.M. He married the developer's daughter, moved to California, and began his career with the GSA.

With a billion dollars a year to spend, half for new construction, the chief architect occupies design's power corner. Thirty border stations are in the pipeline. Forty courthouse projects are "active," including those in Toledo, Ohio; Charlotte, N.C.; Greenville, S.C.; Anniston, Ala.; San Antonio; Harrisburg, Pa.; and San Jose, Calif. Work is under way in 120 federal buildings, some new, some being modernized.

The Cape Girardeau Federal Courthouse in Missouri, a $49.3 million, 154,000-square-foot building, exemplifies the regional contextualism favored by lead designers Fentress Bradburn Architects of Denver, while nodding to the civic stature of its neighbor, city hall. The design-build project was executed with PCL Construction Services.
In Houston, the 390,000-square-foot regional headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Investigation was designed by a joint venture of Leo A. Daly/Leatherman/Porter with Utzrus ratings in mind. A gray-green skin of thermal glass includes opaque shades to protect against heat while lending complexity to the building's economical mass. Light will project through the glass onto anodized aluminum shingles covering an inner core of concrete, which should bring this deceptively simple bunker to life. The project is scheduled for completion in 2008.

“It is a great compliment to that effort that we can talk about GSA buildings in the context of an overall discussion of great architecture," says Mack Scogin of Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects in Atlanta, who led the 2004 Design Excellence jury. Looking ahead, he cautions, "How effectively Shepherd manages to balance the demands of excellence and the constraints of cost-consciousness may determine his legacy."

Shepherd downplays his mission as "not so much" change. But he has shifted the emphasis of the most powerful client in America toward high-performance buildings and innovative approaches to workplace designs that put people first.

"Worker productivity and being a great place that people want to come to work" is more important than figuring out the program for “200 people times X board feet of space,” he says.

On the wall of his office, four prints hint at another interest. They show interior projects rather than exteriors. Anyone searching for the personal preference of Shepherd will notice that Meier designed two.

Shepherd prefers talk of substance over style. He notes that he has worked as a project manager on every single project type the GSA handles. "I know what it takes to make a project happen, and I've been in Washington long enough to understand the politics," he says.

Architects can expect him to be a stickler for being on schedule. He is driven by the passing of time, he says, recalling a lesson learned from a junior-high band teacher (for whom he played the saxophone): "To be on time is to be late. To be early is to be on time."

He is equally adamant about keeping on budget. High-profile, high-cost new construction may take a back seat to cheaper retrofits.

He hopes that security features, which can account for 10 percent of the cost of a building, will become an opportunity for designers to push beyond rows of bollards. Shepherd just signed off on a "Perimeter
Security Desk Guide," to be published in March, which will ease architects through the minefield of options and requirements for osa projects.

Shepherd gets high marks from many American architects, who appreciate that he has worked his way up the system, held his own on design reviews, and takes phone calls. But even those who know him are not yet sure how he intends to make his mark as a leader.

"I definitely want to maintain the stature of Design Excellence and the idea that public buildings continue to get recognized for giving something back and truly being public buildings," Shepherd responds. "I want to make it better."

Linda Hales is a design critic at The Washington Post.
Architecture under the GSA will not be classicist or progressive. It will be about worker productivity and offering federal employees a great place to go to work.

The Food and Drug Administration dedicated the new centerpiece building of its 130-acre campus in White Oak, Md., in October. The gracefully curved structure (facing page, top), designed by RSI Partnership, is neatly adjoined and becomes the gateway to a registered historic building (bottom).

Lead designer Andrea Leers of Leers Weinzapfel Associates of Boston fought to preserve contemporary vitality in the 335,000-square-foot federal courthouse in Orlando, Fla. (top), which is due to be completed this year. Judges' concern for security altered the site plan and openness, but a light-filled lobby remains engaging enough for public gatherings.

In the staff conference room (right), chief architect Shepherd (seated at center) with Thomas Grooms, director of design excellence and the arts division (left) and Robert Fraga, assistant commissioner for capital construction program management. Standing from left to right are William Holley, chief engineer; Gilbert Delgado Jr., director of construction excellence; Charles Matta, director of federal buildings and modernizations; Rolando Rivas-Camp; director of historic buildings; and Robert Andrukonis, director of courthouse programs.
Arquitectonica's mammoth design for the Wilkie D. Ferguson Jr. Federal Courthouse in Miami intentionally breaks the mold of civic architecture while accentuating notions of transparency, balance, and equity. Opposing arguments are represented by paired towers, one concave, one convex, on both sides of a curved glass prism. Exterior glass is laminated, insulated, and tinted, offering views of Biscayne Bay while remaining energy conscious and blast-resistant. Helmut, Ohara & Kassabaum was the associate architect on the project.
HOW TO WIN A FEDERAL BID

Competing for a GSA commission begins online. Opportunities are listed at www-fedbizopps.gov. Firms must signal their interest by submitting a thin portfolio—"not exceeding one-quarter-inch thickness," in GSA’s parlance—describing relevant experience.

These portfolios kick off a two-stage evaluation by a panel of five experts. One member of the evaluation board is a "national peer" from the private sector, while the other four include the GSA’s own design and engineering experts and a representative for the client.

The board’s analysis of portfolios will lead to a shortlist. Choices are said to be weighted for past performance (35%), philosophy and design intent (25%), the lead designer’s portfolio (25%), and the lead designer’s qualifications (15%).

Shepherd says the agency is looking for a philosophy and approach that respond to the program as well as demonstrated creativity and experience with similar challenges. Shortlisted firms will be interviewed and ranked. The board will make a recommendation for the commission, but that isn’t necessarily the end of the process.

The panel may be overruled and the commission awarded to a runner-up. Occasionally, a project will be critical enough to require a charrette and evaluation by a jury of three national peers. On a high-stakes project, shortlisted firms may also be subjected to a full-blown design competition to winnow out the losers.

Whatever the exceptions, Shepherd insists, “Selection panels are independent.” He waits to weigh in after the architect has been chosen.

A dramatic open-air rotunda will define the federal courthouse under way in Jackson, Miss. The design, by H3 Hardy Collaboration Architecture of New York, opens the conventional courthouse layout metaphorically while echoing the state capitol rotunda seven blocks away. Daylight will enter the courtrooms through clerestories. Large bay windows will afford views of the proceedings from the street when the building is completed in 2009. (Currently, construction funding is pending.)