

# Tatters of a new courthouse

It seems altogether in character that the gleaming new Middlesex County Courthouse opened for business this week with a substandard jail, severe parking woes, and at least one entranceway suspended 25 feet above ground level.

Since construction began on the 22-story high-rise a decade ago, it has become the house of horrors in a carnival of blunders. The original cost estimate of \$16 million has moved by leaps and bounds to \$76 million, and the bills are still being counted. To retire the bonded indebtedness, the county has indentured its taxpayers through 1991.

Despite tremors from the outset, the construction project has rolled ineluctably, if erratically, forward. The county commissioners who conceived it by turns revised the blueprints and eventually discharged the original contractor, who stopped work in 1970 when the money stopped.

The juggernaut finally overcame two of the three commissioners, John F. Dever Jr. and Frederick J. Connors. They lost their seats last year to reform candidates S. Lester Ralph, the mayor of Somerville, and Paul Tsongas, a Lowell city councilor.

During the protracted controversy, almost no one has denied the need for a new facility to replace the cramped, 160-year-old East Cambridge Courthouse. Criticism has focused on the extravagant trappings for the new courthouse and on the misadministration of its construction.

As the costs soared, the county scrapped plans for an underground garage. Now employees have no place to park.

Late in the day, the county decided to locate a jail on the top three floors of the new structure. But Sheriff John J. Buckley now finds the jail "totally inadequate."

It has a chapel with a domed ceiling, but no gymnasium. Although Buckley doubts the need of a chapel, perhaps the inmates will have occasion to pray there for more space in their cells.

Each cell has only 39 square feet of space, 16 feet less than minimum standards dictate. And the cells on the top three floors are beyond the reach of fire ladders. There is some question whether the county ever will use the jail at all.

No one yet has explained the reasons for the fiasco. A special Senate committee filled six volumes of transcripts with testimony during extensive hearings on the matter, but never filed a report.

Richard D. Gerould, executive secretary of the state Supreme Court, delved into the conundrum for nine months, but dropped it without a conclusion because he said he lacked sufficient resources to complete his study. A three-man Middlesex Courthouse Review Board met on the matter one time — just long enough to submit their resignations.

The Legislature two years ago enacted a partial remedy when it brought county construction under the supervision of the state Bureau of Building Construction. Unresolved, however, is the more critical issue: Who decides what kind of courthouses to build, how many, and where?

Rep. Charles Flaherty (D-Cambridge) has proposed legislation placing the entire judicial system directly under the purview of the state. In that way, judges, rather than county commissioners would originate plans for courthouse construction.

The proposal has merit. But before settling on any remedy, the lawmakers should pinpoint the causes of the fiasco in East Cambridge, for history has a nasty way of repeating itself.