Dallas City Hall, Dallas, Tx

Angling for a civic monument

Peter Papademetriou

Canted front is backdrop for Henry Moore sculpture; from close up (opposite) slope is awesome.

For the new symbolic core of Dallas, I.M. Pei & Partners has devised a block-long cantilever that interlocks urban space with civic structure.

Over a year ago, when the Dallas City Hall was dedicated, former mayor J. Erik Jonsson, under whose administration the concept was conceived, remarked, "What we wanted was a City Hall that was representative of the people and their city. . . . We have that now—a symbol of Dallas." There is no doubt that the idea that carried the project through a decade of controversy and uncertainty was simply a perceived need for a monument.

As Jonsson recalls the period when he took office, just after the assassination of President Kennedy, "People in Dallas were being talked about in every other quarter of the world as living in a city of hate. . . . We wanted architecture of outstanding quality . . . the strength, the inner simplicity that almost inevitably goes with beauty, and the straightforward look that to me sums up what Texans were and how they felt and how they stood up against their problems."

Often, and quite logically, compared with the Boston City Hall, this design by I.M. Pei & Partners and the Dallas firm of Harper & Kemp also reflects the optimistic monumentalism of the 1960s, while revealing the general absence of a meaningful taxonomy of architecture and urban space within the Modern Movement. Historian Thomas Hines has suggested that the significance of the City Beautiful, and its accompanying Beaux-Arts Classicism, was (in a paraphrase of Gertrude Stein) to "put the 'there' there." In Dallas, Pei has curiously maintained a rigorous Modern stance, while employing many of the formal ideas of that very movement that Modernism sought to displace. This design attitude makes the Pei design of particular interest now, as the past decade has seen a reappraisal of formal Classicism and Classical types of urban space.

City Hall's conception was part of a broader assessment of the city, expressed in one of the most significant city government documents, the two-volume *Goals for Dallas* of 1966. As a result of that, the Pei office was chosen, and the initial involvement was a six-month site assessment study.

A place in the city

The City of Dallas had actually acquired the site, in a somewhat rundown warehouse district, over 30 years earlier, then sold it, but it was still available. Along with the neighboring convention center, the City Hall would act to revitalize the commercial area four blocks away. Pei recommended the purchase of an additional seven acres of land fronting the site and separated from it by Marilla Street; this was to become the civic plaza park that is the "front porch" for the entire 12-acre project. As conceived, the eventual development was to be a significant civic space, a place for important events, ultimately defined by new buildings. (A new central public library facility is currently under construction directly across the park plaza.)

As the project proceeded, it was subject to forces both political and economic. Shelved after initially high construction bids, it was reactivated at favorable costs during a soft construction market. Then trade union strikes and disagreement about the design among City Council members contributed to delays in completion. Through it all, the visual impact of the design itself, with its futuristic associations, was responsible for its caricature in the midst of every public controversy.

The eight-story building (with two additional basement stories, plus parking for 1325 cars extending 423 ft forward from the base) is actually anvil-shaped in section. Its gravity-defying image is realized through a combination of 14 bearing walls

and related roof-level box beams, using an ingenious post-tensioning loop system.

The 600-ft length is organized in six open lofts, some 65 ft in depth, separated by 14-ft-wide zones containing service elements. At the rear, the two end zones are turned at right angles to the building mass, generating a partially closed form and denying a reading as a continuous extrusion. This turning of the corner on both ends presents a somewhat clumsy juxtaposition of cantilever forms, compounding the disconcerting "leaning" effect.

On the north front, one of the bays is specially articulated and diagrammatically contains the "unique" functions such as Mayor's office, Council chamber, and main public lobby entrance. The total extent of the building block is broken down by the insertion of three rounded vertical elements some 37 ft wide which contain broad stairs. These elements somewhat contradict the reading of the cantilever by seeming to prop it up, although they have been detailed to read as independent of structure.

City Hall nevertheless is rendered—and perceived—mainly as a single block, and the actual physical size of the building contributes to its monumental image. Its divisions are physically large, its repetitiveness is consistent. The perfection of Pei's concrete work (P/A, Sept. 1974, p. 90) contributes to the large uniformity of surface. At ground level, the lowest story is solid concrete to a height of 15 ft, broken only for—and because of—the entry. This "anchors" the base of the form visually, yet would appear to deny any ground-level relationship for the pedestrian between the building and to the park plaza itself. There is, moreover, little of the gradation of scale elements that would contribute to the gradual unfolding of impressions measured by the individual's relationship to any part. With none of these transitions of scale, City Hall remains distant in its reading by the individual, who is dominated at close range by its monumentality.

Open space out front

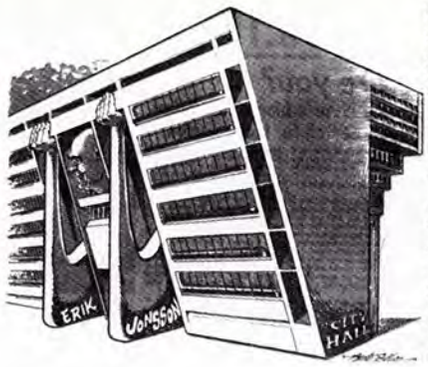
The simplicity of the park plaza is its virtue; its great diagonal slash has the elegance of a heraldic shield and reconciles a variety of contextual forces, including an 8-ft difference in natural grade. The larger portion of this space resulting from the diagonal cut is the level plaza in front of the building entry. (The Marilla Street easement immediately in front of the building, marked by bollards, is now closed to traffic.) Walks reflect natural paths to the midpoint of the diagonal wall, developed as a "knuckle" in a semicircular series of steps leading to the recently installed focal sculpture by Henry Moore. Overlaid on the crisp geometry are gnarled live oak and red oak trees indigenous to the region. A 180-ft-round pool of bright blue water contains a bobbing red sculpture by Marta Pan. The far northwest corner is anchored by three somewhat awkward conical flagpoles, which are unfortunately distracting in the overall composition.

In any event, the issue of an inseparable relationship between the building and the space remains. Perhaps the dramatic 34-degree angle is too literal a "fit" between building and open space, although it generates the essential conditions of the architectural *parti*, including the step-section interior solution. The fact that interiors could be allocated to service departments in response to this diagram is beside the point, for the building concept is the result of an urban design concept.

This is not to dismiss the nearly 800,000 sq ft of programmed spaces. These are organized essentially as loft spaces, with department layouts developed by the Pei office, working with the City Manager on a subsequent contract. Where partition heights and patterns have maintained the open feeling, the concept is most successful; notable disappointments occur in the Legal Department where full-height enclosures create a rabbit-warren of spaces.

The "great court" at the core of the building, roofed by three vaulted clerestories, has a pleasant quality of light, in contrast with the dark interior of Boston City Hall. One level up—by escalator—from the principal lobby, this court, along with a Water Department lobby on the east side, is a primary area of public contact.

Entry, however, still remains a problem. The relationship to underground parking is somewhat tentative, the main access points being at the three stair towers,



Reprinted from the Dallas Times Herald, Bob Taylor

which paradoxically impede circulation around them and to elevator cores at the rear. The 14 vertical bearing walls, moreover, continue through the basement levels and obstruct cross circulation in part of the parking area. For the public, grade-level parking has been provided to the south. But on this side, offices at grade

City Hall, Tempe, Az.

appear to have entries in each bay, which have been kept permanently locked; the two understated entries into the main lobby have the distinct feeling of being back doors to a building facing north.

Forgoing the portico

The visual image of the City Hall and its cultural significance must ultimately be evaluated by analyzing the pedigree of its shapes. While loggias and colonnades have a history of use with open plazas, for this building Pei chose rather to exercise his options within the Modern Movement. Its formal character is not within the lexicon of existing public images of civic architecture, and the monumental qualities it pos-

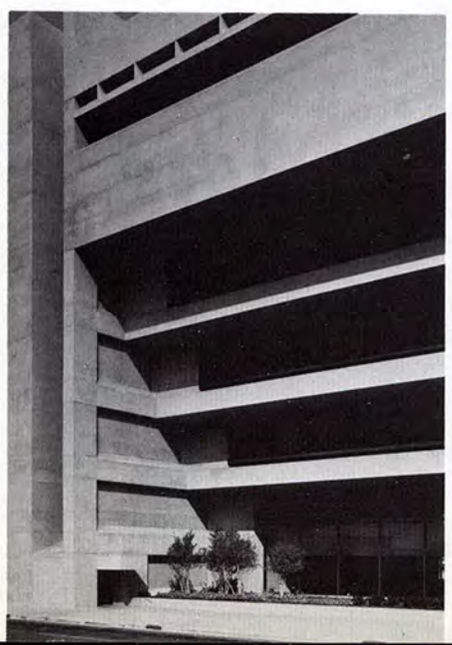
Views from northwest, west, and south (below, from left) show angled and stepping forms expanding from narrow base. On south front, as on north, lobby location is expressed, but entrances here are tucked into corners (right).

sesses remain abstract and singular—"original." The angular forms are understandable within an expressionist strain of Modernism, from the stepped sections of Sant'Elia to Gropius' Memorial to the March Victims, to Cook's Plug-in City, Isozaki's Sky Cluster, and Tigerman's Urban Matrix. The resoluteness of its execution would identify Dallas City Hall more closely with these examples than with Le Corbusier's youth center at Firminy, whose visual image is similar yet decidedly less monumental. An inevitable conclusion to this futuristic impulse is perhaps indicated by the city hall at Tempe, Az.

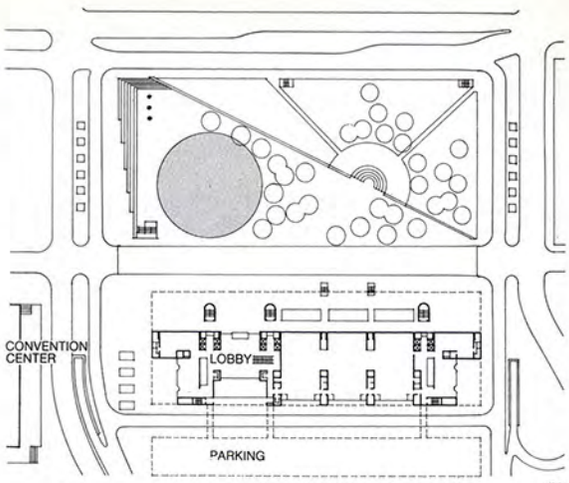
Should our institutions mirror society, or be beacons to it? Clearly, in Dallas, architecture has taken the heroic stance. Through this monumental gesture, City Hall has given a focus both for civic pride as defined by former mayor Jonsson and for the evolution of a major urban space, identified by its unique architectural shape. The singularity of its design, however, remains perhaps its failing. For the Dallas City Hall, while unquestionably a stunning Modern building in many aspects, gives evidence that we are still without a design discourse on general principles for a contemporary civic art. □

Data

Project: Dallas City Hall, Dallas, Tx.
Architects: I.M. Pei & Partners, New York, (team: I.M. Pei, Eason H. Leonard, Theodore J. Musho, Theodore A. Amberg, George Woo, Harry Barone) and Harper & Kemp, Dallas.
Site: approximately 12 acres at the south edge of downtown, just east of Convention Center.
Program: approximately 775,000 sq ft of offices; underground parking for 1325 cars.
Structural system: cast-in-place post-tensioned concrete (see P/A, Sept. 1974, p. 90).
Major materials: exposed concrete, gray-tinted glass; granite paving; carpet above lobby level.
Consultants: Terry-Rosenlund & Co., structural; Gaynor & Sirmen, Inc. (mechanical).
General contractor: Robert E. McKee, Inc.
Photos: Peter Papademetriou.



Building expands below plaza, as well as above it. Skylighted central court (photo below) extends east from lobby, one flight up; four tiers of open corridors and glassed-in offices overlook areas for public transactions at court floor level.



PLAN AT PLAZA LEVEL

CROSS SECTION — CITY HALL AND PLAZA