

James Hadley nailed it precisely in his essay “Selling the Vision” (November/December 2007) when he compared the excesses of the aggressive styling frenzy currently loose in our profession with those of the auto industry’s tail-fin era. As a longtime “pre-visualizer,” I have no problem with the vision part, but rather with the substance — the product — being sold.

One of the pleasures of living and practicing in New England is that it is often slightly behind the bleeding edge of style-du-jour gimmickry, avoiding the eventual embarrassment of folly occasionally endured by, say, the other coast. The cultural pendulum is always in motion — whether in skirt lengths, necktie widths, or politics — and by the time it begins to swing back from inevitable excess, those who have shown some restraint and patience may seem a bit wiser.

Hadley mentions Philip Johnson (“posing as... a visionary”) and Lord Norman Foster’s work where “the building form is an integral part of achieving the goal... of the enhancement of the day-to-day lives of the building occupants.” Johnson and Foster were my critic and classmate, respectively, at Yale in the ’60s — and their widely differing attitudes were fully apparent even then.

I believe, optimistically, that the architectural pendulum is nearing its apogee of stylistic excess and we will soon begin to see thoughtful, responsible, sustainable work from offices like Foster’s become the “hottest new design.”

*Paul Stevenson Oles FAIA
Santa Fe, New Mexico*

Last time I went to City Hall, I brought my eight-year-old daughter with me. As we approached the building, she said, “Do we have to go in there, Mommy? It looks like a jail.” I could have given her a litany of reasons why the building is significant; instead, I replied, “You’re right.” When I remove my architect’s glasses, I see these less-than-admirable qualities: the solid three-story brick wall along Congress

Street kills one side of a great public plaza at the Holocaust Memorial; the garbage bins and loading dock are directly across from Faneuil Hall; all those exterior stairs make the upper plaza difficult to access; the gray concrete exterior cantilevers over everything like a WWII military bunker (I’ve always expected to see the noses of cannons sticking out the top floor); the entrance is... where? And the plaza is so blank and oversized it makes even 10,000-person protests seem insignificant. These are expensive design flaws to fix, if the building is to remain at all. We need to get beyond venerating (or vilifying) the architecture, admit its deficiencies, and think creatively about finding some cash.

One idea I’ve floated is to propose a new mixed-use project between City Hall and Cambridge Street, on the site of the current plaza. The city could use the proceeds from that land sale to improve the current building and create a new ramped, tree-filled plaza between the Government Center T and Faneuil Hall. Just imagine! We’d lose some concrete paved area, but there would still be plenty of space for protest gatherings. More important, what we’d gain is an enlivened city center and a respectful (even dramatic) adaptation of an imperfect City Hall. I know there have been many plans in the past that have bit the dust, but our precious center deserves one more try. Are we ready yet?

*Tamara M. Roy AIA, LEED AP
Cambridge, Massachusetts*

It’s hard to think of many buildings that could fill an entire magazine, let alone two issues in three years. As much as I enjoyed the intoxicating brew of ideas for Boston City Hall (September/October 2007), I fear it will only deepen the dilemma the building poses. The building embodies both the exhilarating power of grand design ideas and their practical limitations. Were it only a monument or an artifact, a Modernist Lincoln Memorial or Parthenon, City Hall’s virtues would be paramount. But the idea that you can fix its

failures as a place to work or pay a parking ticket with another set of big ideas — a sleeve! vitrines! an eroded base! — risks just compounding the problem. The building could benefit from a strategic intervention or two, but mostly it just needs a methodical retrofit which respects its power as monumental sculpture and quietly transforms it into usable space. This involves mechanical engineering, lighting, acoustics, and wayfinding more than new design. The article titled “Mending Modernism” starts to capture this approach. It would be great to devote an entire issue of *EngineeringBoston* (if only there was such a thing) to the building, and to use the big ideas for the plaza, an empty vessel waiting to be filled.

*Matthew Kiefer
Goulston & Storrs
Boston*

Fascinating issue on City Hall — did you think it was unbalanced by save-the-bunker boosterism? Kinda sounded like art experts ordering Federal Building workers in New York to navigate through Serra’s Tilted Arc and damn well like it.

At any rate, a fully fair evaluation of the architectural quality of City Hall — which you are under no compulsion to give — would include the alternate designs at the time (was it something in the water?) as well as the buildings demolished to make way. And I did notice that no one advanced the notion that, if architecture really can ennoble people, an elegant neo-Classical building — if such a thing can really be built now — might ennoble people a tad more than “a document of its time,” a favorite argument on the preservation side. The building really does have more in common with a subway station raised above ground than a seat of democracy.

“*ArchitectureBoston*” — why don’t we have one of those in New York? Maybe I’ll move.

*Christopher Gray
Office for Metropolitan History
New York City*

Robert Campbell's review, "Working with City Hall" in *The Boston Globe* of September 23 certainly helps me focus on one critical concern raised by the September/October 2007 issue of *ArchitectureBoston*. That concern has to do with a pervasive amnesia when discussing the care and feeding of recent Modern architecture and how to create more Modern architecture in the future.

Before one gets weepy about the current harried status of Boston City Hall, I would ask everyone to shed a tear for and, better yet, study what was there before — Scollay Square and the West End, which still exist in living memory. It was not that long ago that urban renewal, our self-applied version of London's Blitz, led to their demise. Perhaps now, with global warming, Boston will actually become Siena with the Campo that I.M. Pei envisioned in his Government Center Plan — I hope not.

The architectural improvements suggested by the talented young designers seem very much like the various makeover shows on television. How can we possibly hope to accomplish anything of substance or lasting value without a philosophical concept of a seat of government for a "city on a hill"? The next step is not sexing up an award-winning building that inspired look-alikes in several other corners of the world. It requires the government of Boston to explore how services will be conceived and delivered and what facilities are needed where; to plan the next-stage evolution of Government Center and City Hall Plaza in conjunction with planning the radial development of Boston from the core of the Shawmut Peninsula to the harbor and the rivers and crossing the Rose Kennedy Greenway; to rethink the development plan of the Seaport District; and to press on with the Washington Street Corridor. The City has a role (and perhaps even a presence) in each.

John L. Wilson FAIA
Boston

The architects who presented their re-design concepts for Boston City Hall had a chance to re-imagine and re-invent the concept of open space as civic space. All Bostonians deserve this same opportunity,

in the form of a temporary, participatory design project known as Civic Gardens for City Hall Plaza.

Civic Gardens for City Hall Plaza is a public-art and civic-engagement project that can include all residents of Boston in the conceptual and literal re-design of City Hall Plaza. It would consist of a collection of movable garden planters containing a variety of landscape elements such as lawn, trees, and hedges. The participatory element would consist of a plan of the Plaza that residents of Boston could download or find at their library or community center and submit with their designs for how the planters should be set up across City Hall Plaza. Each month, for a period of two years, another design would be selected from among all submissions citywide and the Plaza would be reconfigured.

The goal of Civic Gardens for City Hall Plaza is to democratize the opportunity that so few of us have in this day and age to influence how the city is built and designed. In many ways, this would engage the entire city in coming up with the best ideas for how to reuse or redevelop City Hall Plaza, as well as how to design City Hall if and when it actually is moved. A group of civic-minded designers and artists is willing to take the lead to coordinate this effort to bring both City Hall to the people, and the ideas and inspiration of the people to City Hall — interested readers may reach me at liu_jeremy@yahoo.com.

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