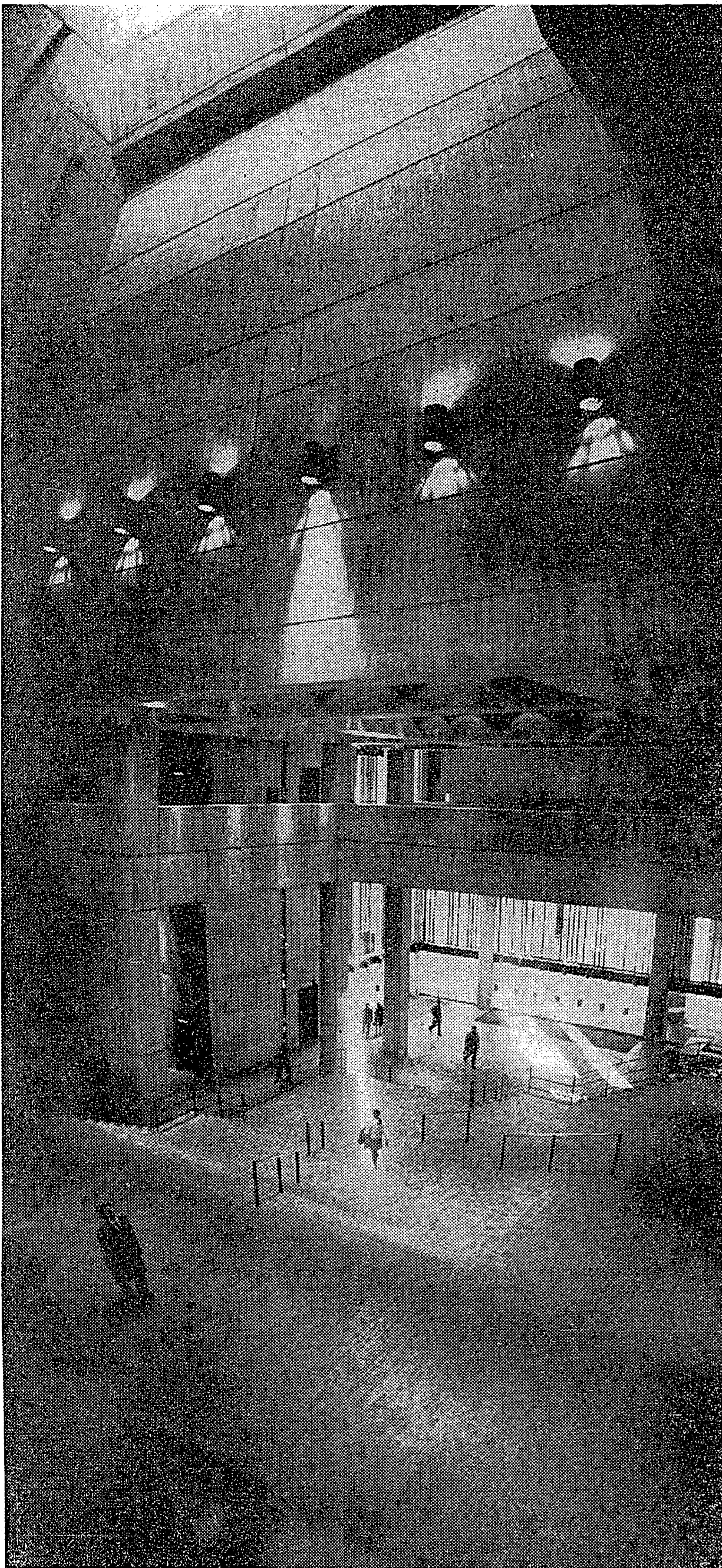


Boston's New City Hall: A Public Building of Quality



The focus of Boston's new City Hall is its lobby, which rises nine stories to skylights and centers on a platform of ascending brick steps. Building will be dedicated Monday.



In this view from the west, Faneuil Hall—one of the city's most historic buildings—is at right, just beyond City Hall. Boston Harbor is in rear.

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BOSTON, Feb. 4—"Whatever it is, it's not beautiful," said the Boston cab driver taking the visitor to the new City Hall. "What would you call it, Gothic?" asked another. Which about sums up the architectural gap, or abyss, as it exists between those who design and those

who use the 20th century's buildings. The new \$26.3-million Boston City Hall has been an object of

international attention and debate since the architects, Kallmann, McKinnell & Knowles, won the competition for its design in 1962. A week of festivities marking its opening starts Saturday, with the official dedication on Monday. The move is virtually complete from the 1862 Civil War City Hall a few blocks away.

Boston can celebrate with the knowledge that it has produced a superior public building in an age that values cheapness over quality as a form of public virtue. It also has one of the handsomest buildings around, and thus far, one of the least understood. It is not Gothic. ("No kiddin'," said the cab driver.) It is a product of this moment and these times—something that can be said of successful art of any period. And it is a winner, in more ways than one.

Not only cab drivers are puzzled by the unconventional structure. Cultural and community leaders who are also society's decision makers and a public with more and higher education than at any time in history also draw a

blank. Too bad about that architecture gap. It has a lot to do with the meanness of our cities.

Boston's new City Hall is a solid, impressive demonstration of creativity and quality—uncommon currencies in today's environment. A powerful focus for the new Government Center that has replaced the sordid charms of the old Scollay Square, it makes a motley collection of very large, very average new buildings around it look good. It confers, in a kind of architectural status transferral, an instant image of progressive excellence on a city government traditionally known for something less than creativity and quality. That is an old trick of architecture called symbolism.

The New Boston

They call it the new Boston, but inside the new structure Councilors Saltonstall and Timilty work side by side at old desks moved from the old City Hall that suggest the old politics. The City Council gave itself a raise but voted down the \$24,000, room-size, horseshoe installation that would have completed the Council Chamber and accommodated all its members in the new style.

The Mayor, Kevin White, (ambivalent about the building), and the City Council (mixed reactions from approval to acute denunciation) are fighting over space now used as an exhibition gallery. Tradition dies hard in Boston.

The building will survive the councilors' objections and the Mayor's ideas of decoration. Its rugged cast-in-place and precast concrete and

brick construction, inside and out (the New Brutalism, for those who like stylistic labels) is meant to be impervious to the vicissitudes of changing tastes and administrations.

The monumentality of this public building—and it is magnificently monumental without a single one of those pompous pratfalls to the classical past that building committees clutch like Linus's

blanket—is neither forbidding nor austere.

It is an "open" City Hall. At ground level, it is meant to serve as a concourse to other parts of the city, and there are views of the city from every part of the structure. The visitor is made aware of the city in a very special way—of its history, in the architects' sensitively glass-framed vistas through

deep concrete modular window reveals of adjoining Federal brick buildings and Faneuil Hall and the granite Quincy Market and waterfront to the east, and of its burgeoning growth in new construction to west, north and south.

No Small Achievement

This appropriate and finely calculated sense of historic continuity is no small architectural achievement.

Today's buildings rupture historic scale and this one was placed in the heart of historic Boston. But there is no "style-dropping" here. The architects have neatly disposed of Preservation Fallacy Number One. There are none of the overblown vestigial traditional details or "recalls" considered "appropriate" in such situations, milked of architectural meaning and offered as pious ligaments between old and new to create caricatures of both. This is subtle, dramatic, respectful homage to the past by an uncompromising present. It is a lesson in proper preservation philosophy and esthetics.

There is also a lesson in that basic element of building, the use of space. The entire structure is conceived as a progression of functional and hierarchical spaces. Its striking exterior reflects this arrangement.

A Molding of Space

This is not space as a container. See any office building for that. It is space molded to function, form and expressive purpose. The striking irregular shapes and surfaces that show the functions and mechanical services, all of which are more commonly hidden behind flat walls and ceiling slabs, are part of the visual and sensuous impact.

The building is a hollow rectangle around a court. Its focus is the lobby, which rises a dramatic nine stories on two sides to skylights, and centers on a platform of ascending brick steps. This is a space equally satisfactory to connoisseurs of the art of architecture and the art of sit-ins, and that is exactly what the designers had in mind as public architecture.

Above the lobby are the Council Chamber and offices and the Mayor's quarters. These large, ceremonial rooms are visible outside as rugged projections on the building's east and west facades, and as strong, broken wall planes inside, within the soaring skylight shafts. The upper levels are office space. This also shows clearly on the outside, as a massive, stepped "cornice" at the top.

In a Brick Plaza

The building stands, not in isolation, but on a still-unfinished fan-shaped brick plaza of stepped levels that will embrace the neighboring structures. This promises to be one of the more impressive of today's urban spaces.

It is as certain as politics and taxes that without the national competition that was held for this building nothing like it would have been designed or constructed. Mr. Kallmann and Mr. McKinnell were young and unknown as architects when they won. The usual route of public building commissions is through political patronage or to familiar, established names.

The architects have devoted seven years to the project, working with the Boston firm of Campbell, Aldrich & Nulty, and Le Messurier Associates, structural engineers. Virtually no changes have been made in the prize-winning design. The result is a tough and complex building for a tough and complex age, a structure of dignity, humanism and power. It mixes strengths with subtleties. It will outlast the last hurrah.



West entrance to the building's open lobby. Over the entrance is the City Council chamber; above, office floors.