

BOSTON CITY HALL

1 CITY HALL PLAZA

EST. 1961-68

KALLMANN, MCKINNELL
& KNOWLES, ARCHITECT

THEN



Courtesy of the Bostonian Society

NOW



Photo by Todd Landry

HISTORY

Boston's iconic City Hall was designed and built in the mid-1960s as the signature project of the \$100 million Government Center Urban Renewal Plan. This plan, which transformed Scollay Square into what it is today, remains one of the most ambitious efforts of the urban renewal era. Though the master plan for Government Center was crafted by I.M. Pei for Ed Logue, the powerful Director of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the design for City Hall itself was the result of a public design competition. From over 250 submissions, the competition jury comprised of architects and prominent businesspeople unanimously selected a bold, modernist design by three relatively unknown Columbia University design critics Gerhard Kallmann, Noel McKinnell, and Edward Knowles.

According to designer Noel McKinnell, the design of the building was meant to reflect the complex program inside. "Everything is laid out before you. While it's a complex space, City Hall is planned so that you always know where you're going and where you came from." McKinnell was also clear on the importance of his design, like city government, having the flexibility to evolve to meet new requirements over time. "It isn't a finished object...this isn't a building where the pattern is frozen, where, if you move one detail you ruin everything. The process of democratic government is the meaning of City Hall. It should never be finished" (Boston Globe, February 9, 1969).

Even before construction began on the new City Hall, the geometry and materiality of the premeated design inspired strong responses, both positive and negative. A group of architects, planners speaking in opposition of the entry declared "the design...completely disregards and flouts the past and gives no encouragement to the future architecture of Boston," to which the Committee on Civic Design countered "we have history, but we must continue to make history" (Boston Globe, May 27, 1962). A year later, architectural historian Henry Millon declared "as everyone knows, the Boston City Hall will probably turn out to be one of the best pieces of civic architecture built in the U.S. in the last 50 years" (Boston Globe, May 26, 1963). Almost fifty years later, the debate continues.