

# The Form and Use of Public Space in a Changing Urban Context

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Serena C. Keswani

Bachelor of Architecture  
Sir J. J. College of Architecture  
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Submitted to the Department of Architecture  
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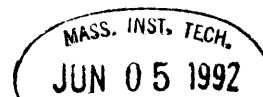
Michael Dennis  
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by

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Julian Beinart, Chairman  
Departmental Graduate Committee  
Department of Architecture

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on May 8, 1992  
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### **ABSTRACT**

Today appropriately designed architectural settings that adequately serve the function of supporting public life are rare. Sociologists and psychologists have consistently observed the alienating effects of modernity, and of modern attitudes to life, on community and society. It is believed that as a result of these attitudes of extreme individualism, public life in American cities has declined over the last few decades. The urban square, as the classic example of a public space, is studied here in the present context of an American city. While it is clear that the reasons for this decline in public life are much deeper than merely architectural, the underlying premise is that it is at least partly due to the inappropriateness of its physical and programmatic design that the square no longer plays an active role in the public realm. **Public space is being designed without people in mind and hence has become merely an empty symbol of public life.**

The Government Center Plaza in Boston is used as the specific example for the study. A comparative analysis of the various plans proposed for it illustrates that though it is partially the prevailing theories of urban renewal in the 60's and modernist city planning ideals that are responsible for the current unsatisfying square, it is, as evidenced by the plan proposed by Kevin Lynch and John Myer, among others, with the firm of Adams, Howard and Greeley, still entirely possible to design satisfying urban public spaces which attempt to bridge between the planning approaches of the past and those which meet the functional demands of our times. That this plan was not the one eventually built is itself indicative of the problems in the urban design attitudes of that period.

Thesis Supervisor: Michael Dennis

Title: Professor, Department of Architecture



*This thesis is dedicated to my parents.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**CONTENTS**

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| <b>Introduction</b>                                 | 9    |
| <b>Public Life and Place</b>                        | 11   |
| <b>The Public-ness of Public Space</b>              | 13   |
| <b>The Form of Public Space</b>                     | 15   |
| <b>Case Study: Government Center Plaza, Boston</b>  | 21   |
| <b>Brief History of the Conception of the Plaza</b> | 22   |
| <b>A Comparison of the Plans</b>                    | 27   |
| <b>The City Planning Board (CPB) Plan</b>           | 27   |
| <b>The Adams, Howard and Greeley Plan</b>           | 29   |
| <b>The Pei Plan</b>                                 | 39   |
| <b>The Plaza as it Exists Today</b>                 | 57   |
| <b>Summation of Case Study</b>                      | 73   |
| <b>Conclusion</b>                                   | 81   |
| <b>Bibliography</b>                                 | 85   |

All photographs and drawings not credited to other sources are the work of the author.

Note: All references to the firm Pei, Cobb, Freed and Partners in this text refer, in actuality, to the firm I. M. Pei and Partners.





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## Introduction

The individual's present relationship to the collective is as empty as it is equitable: community does nothing for them and they do nothing for community.<sup>1</sup>

Urban society in America has undergone some major transformations since the industrial revolution and, consequently, so has its public life. The preoccupation of people with private comforts and pleasures has left the public realm neglected. As architects and urban designers, this forces us to re-evaluate both the need for, and the forms of, the physical settings that support public life.

This thesis was begun with the aim of attempting to understand where the public life in American cities takes place today. There still exist urban spaces which are called squares and plazas, but which by no means function as the centers of public life in the way the archetypal European plaza did. Initial investigations seemed to suggest that public life had been transformed into non-spatial expressions such as the media, and that the street, the park and the shopping mall served as settings for public life. However, upon a preliminary examination, it soon became apparent that though each of these form a part of the total public realm, each has various shortcomings in adequately satisfying the demands of public life.

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<sup>1</sup> Oldenburg, Ray, *The Great Good Place*, 1989, p. 285

Being unable to find any satisfying alternative contemporary settings for public life, it was decided to study the classic example of a public space - the urban square - in the current context of an American city. The underlying perception was that it is at least partly due to the inappropriateness of its physical and programmatic design that the square no longer plays an active role in the public realm. The aim was to investigate the reasons for this deficiency.

The constraints of time necessitated that this study be limited to dealing with the development of a single square. Recognizing the fact that it is not possible to make any general conclusions from a single example, it was hoped that there would be lessons to learn from it which could perhaps, by the judicious drawing of parallels, inform some of the design decisions of other squares. Government Center Plaza in Boston was selected for this purpose. However, it must be emphasized that it is not the aim of the thesis to attempt to find a generic solution to the problem of designing squares, there being too many variables in individual cases for this to be either desirable or possible.

Nor does this mean that the square is the only setting where public life occurs. It is only one *type*<sup>2</sup> among the realm of public spaces, each

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<sup>2</sup> One could classify and analyze *types* of public spaces in various ways - based on *function*, that is, civic, commerce, entertainment, spectacle, exchange of information or religious functions, etc.; or based on *form*, that is, enclosure, geometry, scale, relation to street, etc.; or based on *degrees of publicness*, that is, accessible to every person (ex. city park), to a smaller group (ex. malls), to a discreet group (ex. clubs),

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contributing to the total experience. If well-designed, it could be perhaps, one of the most conducive, but it does not preclude other settings for public life such as pedestrian streets, farmers markets, etc.

## Public Life and Place

A city isn't just a place to live, to shop, to go out and have the kids play. It's a place that implicates how one derives one's ethics, how one develops a sense of justice, and most of all how one learns to talk with and learn from people who are unlike oneself, which is how a human being becomes human.<sup>3</sup>

The more the myth of empty impersonality, in popular forms, becomes the common sense of a society, the more will that populace feel morally justified in destroying the essence of urbanity, which is that men can act together without the compulsion to be the same.<sup>4</sup>

To talk of public life is to open the gates to a flood of profound issues, some of which encompass the meaning of life itself. Authors like Hannah Arendt, Richard Sennett and Philip Slater, among others, have

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to more localized communities (ex. residential squares), etc. In practice, these classifications are rarely mutually exclusive; each public space is a composite of all these, and we then refer to them in extremely general categories such as the street, the square, the park, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Sennett, *"The Civitas of Seeing,"* in *Places*, Vol 5, #4. 1989

<sup>4</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Fall Of Public Man*, 1977, p. 255

analyzed in length the reasons for the decline of public life in "the West" since the nineteenth century. Arendt and Sennett hold the view that city life is, by definition, political, since it represents a diversity of people and needs which require constant dialogue and prioritizing. This, to them, is what is at the root of public life. Without dialogue between diverse groups, democracy itself cannot survive. The primary function of public space, in their eyes, is to provide the setting for this dialogue.

Modernism and modern attitudes to life are blamed for a large portion of the problems of public life and place today. Philip Slater asserts that over-emphasis on individuality is one of the core reasons that the public realm in America has suffered a decline. People are indoctrinated with the philosophy of the rat-race - the view that the road to happiness must be, by definition, pursued in isolation along the path of personal achievement only. Other people are viewed as hindrances and obstacles to be avoided in the quest for success. In the end, this form of isolated individualism deprives us of the richness of human exchange and diversity.

These attitudes similarly found expression in the physical environment, leading to the decline of public space. Simultaneously, the automobile, the skyscraper and the suburb - all manifestations of modern life in American cities - escalated the demise of the traditional forms of urban space. Today, however, having had the benefit of historical distance from the influences of that period, there seems to be a renewed interest

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in the public realm and a willingness to rethink attitudes to the design of public space.

The issue of public space poses as many complex questions as does that of public life. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt a theoretical discussion on that scale. The case study is being used as the vehicle with which to explore themes that are specific to its context but which, possibly, find some pertinence to the general issue.

### **The Public-ness of Public Space**

If we valued fraternity as much as independence, and democracy as much as free enterprise, our zoning codes would not enforce the social isolation that plagues our modern neighborhoods, but would require some form of public gathering place every block or two.<sup>5</sup>

No one can prescribe a set of rules which ensure a solution to the problem of public space in American cities, but it is necessary to describe some qualities that characterize public spaces, since these essentially define public life.

The definition of public as described in The Webster's Dictionary is as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> Oldenburg, Ray, *The Great Good Place*, 1989, p. 23

**public** \ˈpʌb-lik\ *adj* [ME *publique*, fr. MF, fr. L *publicus*, prob. alter. of *poplicus*, fr. *populus* the people] (15c) **1 a**: of, relating to, or affecting all the people or the whole area of a nation or state (<~ law> **b**: of or relating to a government **c**: of, relating to, or being in the service of the community or nation (an eminent figure in ~ life) (<~ affairs>) **2 a**: of or relating to people in general: UNIVERSAL **b**: GENERAL, POPULAR **3**: of or relating to business or community interests as opposed to private affairs: SOCIAL **4**: devoted to the general or national welfare: HUMANITARIAN **5 a**: accessible to or shared by all members of the community **b**: capitalized in shares that can be freely traded on the open market (a ~ company) — compare CLOSE CORPORATION **6 a**: exposed to general view: OPEN **b**: WELL-KNOWN, PROMINENT **c**: PERCEPTIBLE, MATERIAL — **public-ness** *n*

**public** *n* (15c) **1**: a place accessible or visible to the public — usu. used in the phrase *in public* **2**: the people as a whole: POPULACE **3**: a group of people having common interests or characteristics: *specif*: the group at which a particular activity or enterprise aims

**public domain** *n* (1832) **1**: land owned directly by the government **2**: the realm embracing property rights that belong to the community at large, are unprotected by copyright or patent, and are subject to appropriation by anyone

Public spaces are imbued with shades of all these meanings, the most basic one being in the provision of a neutral, if not yet common, ground. Inherent in this is the admittance of diversity in its accessibility; accessibility to people belonging to different classes, ages, sexes, ethnic and ideological groups. And finally, and importantly, the freedom to arrive and depart as one wishes and the freedom of action within the space are inseparable from the meaning of a public space. Without these, no space may be truly called public.

To frame public space in a more evocative light, one of their most crucial roles is to act as a physical manifestation of city life - "... the city is always regarded as the place where everything is happening and where life is rich and enjoyable."<sup>6</sup> They embody a sense of the hub, the 'center'. Public spaces dramatize the city and are a celebration of city life. They can act as a reflection of the beliefs and practices of the

<sup>6</sup> Hummon, David, *Commonplaces*, 1990. p.77.

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society in which they exist. They often accommodate a multiplicity of activities and are flexible in the way they may be used.

History has shown that care and attention in the design of urban spaces, making them appropriate settings for festivities, as well as for everyday social events and functional activities that all can participate in, inspire in all city dwellers a sense of citizenship.<sup>7</sup>

## The Form of Public Space

We're in trouble intellectually in urban studies because we can't really think of forms of the public realm that are, as it were, appropriate to the pains of our society.<sup>8</sup>

It has been argued that public life has not been lost but simply transformed into other expressions than a spatial one. The most often cited ones are the media, the shopping mall, the street and the park. There follows a closer look at the specific roles that these may possibly play in the public realm of the city.

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<sup>7</sup> Lennard, Suzanne, and Lennard, Henry. "Urban Space Design and Social Life", paper presented in the International Making Cities Livable Conference, 1989, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>8</sup> Sennett, Richard, "The Civitas of Seeing," in Places, Vol 5, #4. 1989

### The Media

I got elastic bands keeping my shoes on

Got those swollen hand blues

Got thirteen channels of shit on the T.V. to choose from ...

Pink Floyd, Nobody Home

Michael Brill in "Public Places and Spaces" (1989), among others, advocates the view that the information and communication portion, the discursive and interactive part of public life has migrated largely into the private realm and become more non-spatial in character. He cites T.V. interviews and talk shows, radio call-ins and letter-to-the-editor columns in newspapers as evidence to support his point.<sup>9</sup> Several issues seem to be ignored and the matter rather over-simplified, however. Firstly, how much of T.V. and radio broadcasting time is devoted to such activities and how much infinitely more to entertainment programs whose quality is, at best, dubious? Secondly, media uses, by definition, one or more of the senses only, but never offers the opportunity to involve all of our senses or present to us the emotional potential that person-to-person communication does.<sup>10</sup> The media can have a decidedly adverse effect

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, in an article in the Fall '89 issue of "Places", Brill himself seems to retract somewhat from his stated position, pointing out that though electronic media give us access to more strangers and more information, we have less interaction with them and "we both mistrust the information and use it to reinforce our own stereotypes."

<sup>10</sup> Susan Drucker and Gary Gumpert, "*Public Space and Communication: The Zoning of Public Interaction*" in *Communications Theory*, November 1991.



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on us as well, by numbing our sensibilities and perceptions through over-exposure to violence or crime. Further, it desensitizes us politically by providing an "effigy of confrontation and experience".<sup>11</sup> That is, the mass media strikes a pose of dealing with contemporary social, economic or political issues, but what is actually done is that information is 'managed' - filtered, altered, and ultimately presented as a package deal, a viewpoint which is bought by the observer readymade, not something he has himself thought about and struggled to evaluate. We con ourselves into believing that we have not only faced the issue but also reached some conclusions about it, when actually all we know is the viewpoint the media has chosen to present. The media also distorts our perception in other ways by its very dependance on qualities such as looks, charisma and glib talking.

Perhaps, the media has made it unnecessary for people to seek public places in order to gain knowledge or news, but it is certainly not an adequate substitute for spatial settings in supporting public life.

### **The Shopping Mall**

We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl

Year after year running over same old grounds

Pink Floyd, Wish You Were Here

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, p.17

It is a popular notion among urban designers today that the shopping mall is our society's embodiment of the public realm. Yet, if we scratch just a little beneath the glossy layer of their projected image, few environments could be more inhospitable to public life. It is hard to believe that an institution geared towards the sole economic aim of seducing everyone who ventures into it to buy and consume, housed in a building the very land of which is privately owned, whose authorities reserve the right to refuse access to anyone they choose and disallow any activity political or otherwise, that they may disagree with, whose premises are shut down at some pre-appointed hour everyday, at which time all must be politely thrown out could be a "public" place.

### **The Park**

Parks only came into use in cities after the industrial revolution had separated citizens from easy access to the countryside. Their purpose was to provide a glimpse of nature - idealized, romanticized after the 18th century English naturalist movement.<sup>12</sup> The park essentially fulfills the need for a respite from the crowds, noise, traffic, pollution and hard surfaces of the city. Being accessible to all, open day and night, and located in the very heart of the city, the park has some of the important qualities of a truly public space. Whether it serves public life more effectively - as a place for interaction, is partially dependant on its location within the city, the nature of its boundaries and its possible

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<sup>12</sup>Jere Stuart French, *Urban Space: A Brief History*. p.16

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political or historical significance. It is necessary to distinguish here between a traditional park - a space which is landscaped and which may or may not be largely planted over with trees, and a space which is distinct from an urban square merely by the fact that its ground plane is covered with grass instead of paving. The main squares in early American towns may have been lawns, but their resemblance to a park ended there, associated as their role was with the meeting-house, church town-hall.

### **The Street**

There are many who think that the street will replace the role of traditional public places such as squares. However, while the street definitely plays an important part in the public life of people, its form itself and its necessary open-endedness encourages motion rather than repose. It places on limits its use, even if it is a pedestrian street, for the regular accommodation of large gatherings which require a more "round" space. Streets serve the aspects of public life well which involve ritual festivities, parades, marches and similar activities. They complement, but cannot fully replace, the urban square.

## The Square

No form of open space is older than the square ... the square was there in the beginning, more humble in origin than the park, more down to earth in its daily uses.<sup>13</sup>

The square, in some form or other, has persisted in western cities almost throughout history. In America, they were a necessary functional feature of public life until well into the twentieth century, serving as market places, and as focal points of public assembly.

It is a tenet of this dissertation that the square has lost its time-honoured role, and its function in the modern American city needs to be re-examined.

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<sup>13</sup> Heckscher, August. *Open Spaces: The Life of American Cities*, 1977, p. 139.

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## Case Study: Government Center Plaza, Boston

"Perhaps it is time to reconsider City Hall Plaza, which needs only a giant poster of Mayor Flynn to complete its resemblance to Peking's Tienanmen Square."<sup>14</sup>

There are several reasons for which Government Center Plaza or, as it is commonly referred to, City Hall Plaza, was chosen for this case study. Among the obvious ones are the facts that it is the civic center of Boston, located in the heart of the city and was explicitly designated and designed as a public space by its planners. Among the less apparent reasons is the fact that it was conceived of and built in the '60's, in the not too distant past and most of the issues which went into its creation are still relevant today or at least the lessons that may be drawn from them are. Further, many prominent and respected architects and designers had a hand in the planning of the plaza, which though it has physically been a part of the city for over twenty years now, doesn't today seem to be playing more than a peripheral role as a setting for the public life of the people. The original purpose of this study was to attempt to find the reasons for its presumably inadequate fulfilling of its intended function, by analyzing the plaza in its present state. However, in researching the literature, the subsequent discovery of several earlier and remarkably differing proposals for the Government Center area presented a unique opportunity to highlight and discuss the complexity

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<sup>14</sup> Padjen, Elizabeth, "A Change for the Better in Boston's Open Spaces" in *The Boston Globe*

of the problem in greater detail, by a comparative study of the various proposals. The project included several other public open spaces besides the City Hall plaza and their importance in the overall scheme is illustrated by the generous area given over to them - the area of the main plaza itself is 417,000 square feet as compared to the 513,000 square feet area of the City Hall building and that of the other open spaces is 112,000 square feet.

### **Brief History of the Conception of the Plaza**

There were several plans proposed by different agencies for the Government Center area prior to the one which was finally executed.

Interestingly, in the first plans drawn up by the City Planning Board, one in 1956 and another in 1958, there was no proposal for a plaza at all (fig. 1). The new city hall at that time was set in a small garden surrounded by office buildings. The plaza made its first appearance in the 1959 plan (fig.2) by the firm of Adams, Howard and Greeley, where Kevin Lynch and John Myer, among others, worked on the redesign of the area.<sup>15</sup> This plaza was present as a smaller version than

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<sup>15</sup> In all future references in this text to this plan, though it will be referred to as the Myer plan, it is recognized that the plan was the work of the firm Adams, Howard and Greeley with Kevin Lynch and John Myer.



View of Sears Crescent in the rear and sunken fountain area in front of the Government Center Plaza.

the one later laid out by Pei, Cobb and partners in their 1962 sixty-acre urban renewal plan (fig.3). Apparently, it was introduced in the 1959 design because it was decided that the city hall should be made the focal point of the new development; since, by virtue of its program, it was going to be smaller in size than the numerous office buildings encircling it, it was in need of some other means of emphasizing its importance. The "plaza" was thus conceived as a means of setting off the building. However, this wasn't its only justification; it was integral to the very principles upon which Myer's plan was based - an interlinked chain of open spaces coming to a climax from all directions, in this square.

Later, in Pei's 1962 plans, the plaza "disappeared" since the paving was replaced by a green open space, criss-crossed by pedestrian paths.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, in the brief used for the City Hall competition brochure, the choice of its floor treatment was left to the architects, though the importance to be given to the design of this space, and the other unbuilt-upon areas referred to as "the public open spaces" was stressed. However, their stated concern then was to use these spaces to relate the city hall to the old and new contexts of the other buildings around it.

The space once again came to be a plaza when the design of Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles was selected as the winning entry in 1962.

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<sup>16</sup> The word 'plaza', (coming from the Italian word 'piazza', whose floor finish was never anything but a paved area), is used in this document to refer to a paved square, recognizing that a square may also have a lawn as it's ground plane.



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They, like Myer, conceived of it as a hard-surfaced public space for political demonstrations, rallies and city celebrations. The crucial difference was that in their eyes, its everyday use was merely "to be a space for walking through", whereas Myer's view of its role in the daily lives of people was that it would become a place to *be* in - "All these squares and footways would be furnished with fountains, sculpture, trees and benches ...".<sup>17</sup>

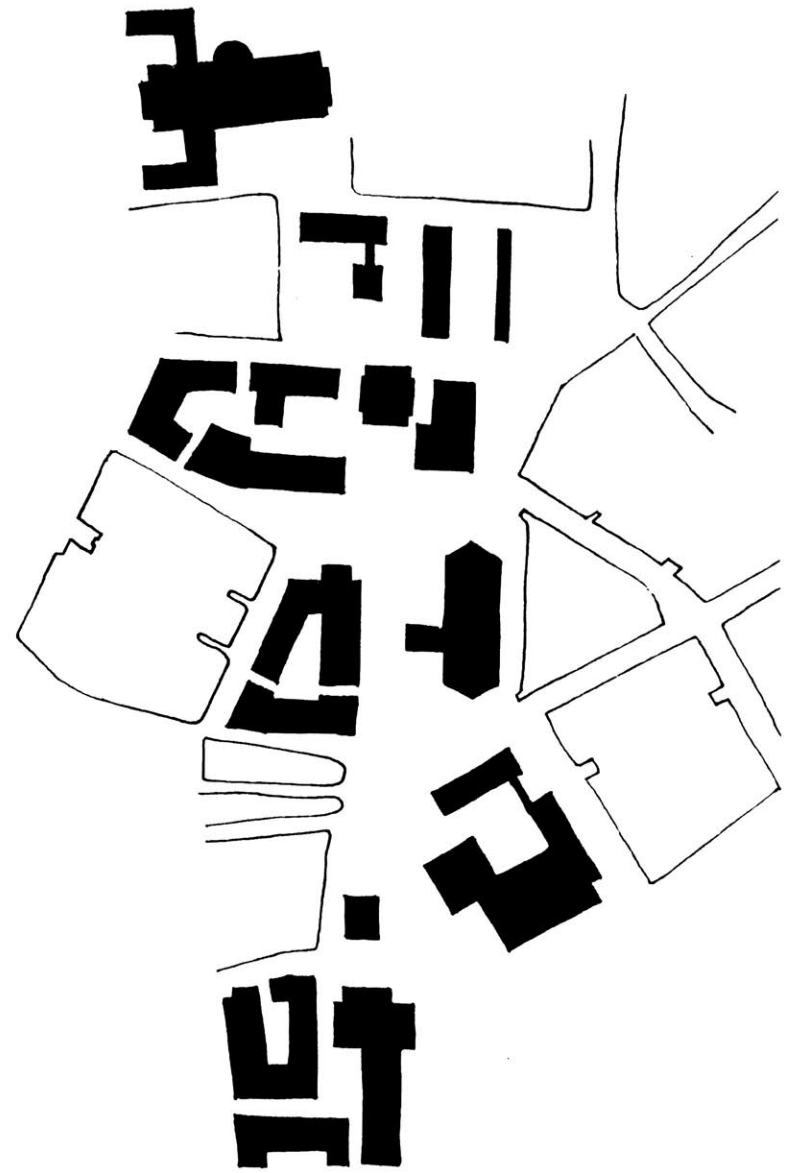
It was the Boston Redevelopment Authority who subsequently demanded that the plaza be more than a place for walking through and for demonstrations. Apparently Pei himself had envisaged trees in the space. So, the new architects agreed to incorporate activities such as outdoor dining, shops, benches and trees in their design for the plaza, but insisted that these be restricted only to the periphery of the space, leaving the center empty. The fountain, too was tucked away in one corner. They stated that the plaza was modelled after the Campo at Siena, which is the source of the brick paving, the radiating levels and the slope, and they wanted to leave the center empty so that it could support many different activities.

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<sup>17</sup> Adams, Howard and Greeley, Technical Report on Final Development Plan for the Government Center Area, June 1959, p.41.



Built fabric of Scollay Square in 1956.



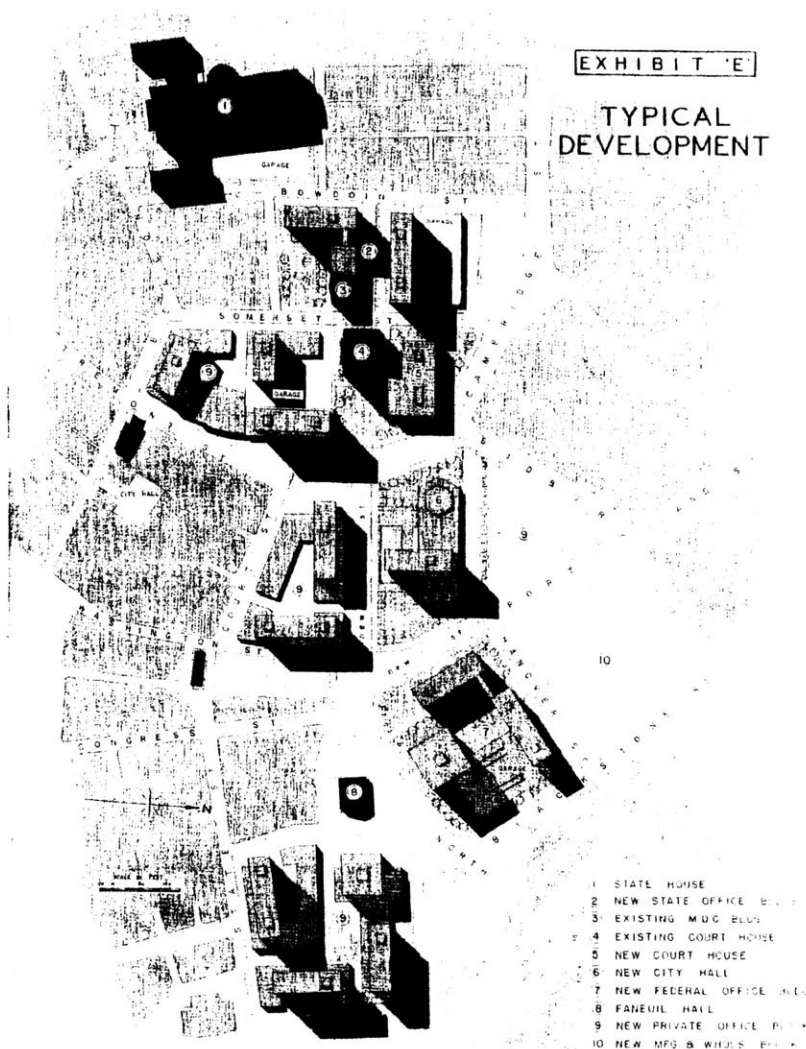
Proposed Plan - by City Planning Board in 1956.

## A Comparison of the Plans

A comparison of the various plans proposed for the area illustrates some startling contrasts in the way the planners approached urban design and inherently, their attitudes to the design of urban public spaces. Given that the aim of all of the proposed plans was to revitalize the area, to provide a spur to the city's economy, to improve the traffic flow and to create a new center for offices of the Federal, State and City governments, the following discussion attempts to analyze the plans in terms of the layout and character of their planned open spaces.

### The City Planning Board (CPB) Plan

The most glaring opposition is apparent in even a cursory comparison of the plan of Scollay Square and its surroundings as it existed before its destruction and the planning approach drawn up by the CPB in 1956. Where earlier there was a continuous fabric of built-up spaces and a series of interconnected squares - from Pemberton square to Scollay square through Cornhill and Brattle square to Adams, Dock and finally Faneuil Hall square, there was now a seemingly random collection of isolated buildings and patches of landscaped green. Pemberton square was replaced by a green area and a garage was planned next to it. Faneuil Hall was retained in a sea of office buildings. Sears Crescent,



CPB Plan - 1956.

Source - Government Center Study:1956, City Planning Board.

the Blackstone block along Hanover street and Quincy Market with its two flanking North and South Market buildings were to be destroyed.

One of the explicit aims of the proposal was to provide a vehicular connection between Cambridge street and Dock square and the ramp and tunnel entrances in the North End. This was achieved by replacing Cornhill by a new street which ran directly perpendicular to Faneuil Hall, and which was looked upon as the "principal axis of the entire design area". A visual link was created between Faneuil Hall and the County Courts building by cutting away the buildings which enclosed Pemberton square along Tremont street. The only public space planned was a small, half hidden court-like space surrounded by private office buildings in the place where Quincy Market stood. The designers saw this as "an extension of the Pemberton square-Dock square corridor". It seems ironic that they were concerned with extending a series of open spaces at one end while simultaneously destroying its central links - for although Adams and Dock squares were preserved as physical territories, the enclosing buildings which defined these spaces and gave them character were demolished and in their place, there were office blocks and open spaces which left the original squares too undefined to evoke the title. Nor was there any attempt to compensate, even in physical terms (compared to it's historic value), for the loss of Scollay square. The provision of the public space provided in the plan seems to be simply a token gesture.

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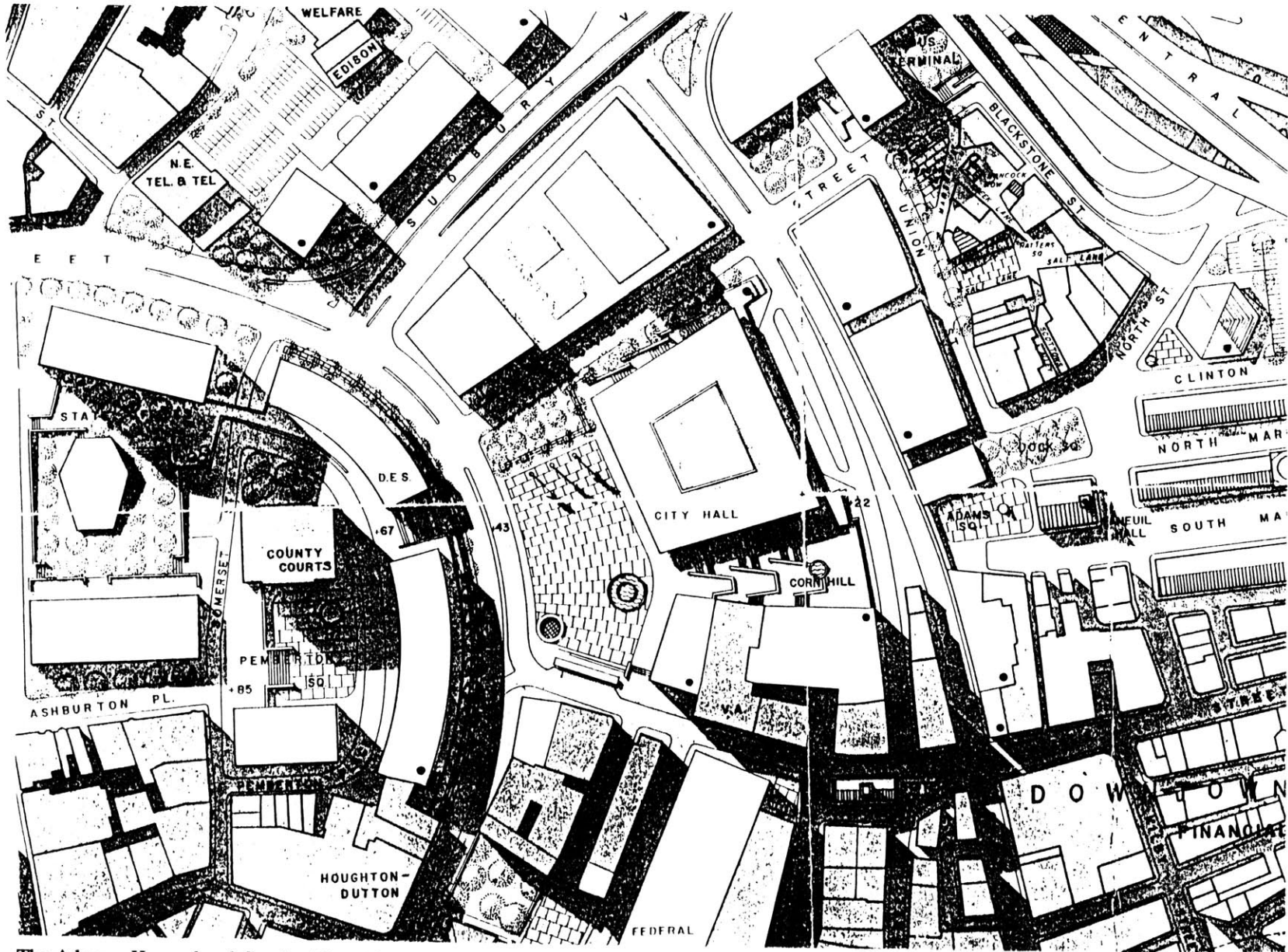
## The Adams, Howard and Greeley Plan

In comparing the CPB plan to Myer's 1959 plan, one is once again presented with two such radically dissimilar approaches that it is hard to believe that both designs responded to the same brief. What immediately strikes one is the sensitivity of the later scheme to the existing conditions of the site. Less of the old building fabric was done away with and much attention was lavished on preserving character and on creating relationships between the various parts of the plan and the surrounding area.

According to the report published by the designers in June 1959, their plan was based on three essential features which determined all the details:

- 1) a basic radial pattern of streets
- 2) a zoning of activities into three general areas - the Government Center proper, mostly in the area between and along Congress and Tremont streets; a conservation area including Faneuil Hall and the Blackstone block; a zone of new growth in the area north of Sudbury street
- 3) a descending "valley" of interlinked public open spaces

The site for the City Hall was chosen from topographic considerations - that is, on the piece of land between the State House and the harbour



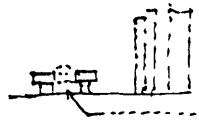
The Adams , Howard and Greeley Plan- 1959  
 Source - Government Center Report, 1959 by AG&H



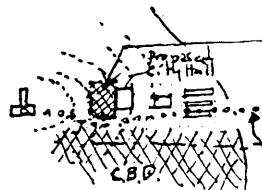
Develop street system in a circumferential/radial pattern in match with form of topography + existing street pattern as it occurs.



Deploy buildings  
 1.) in curved form along west side of Cambridge St. to reinforce upper part of hill.  
 2.) other bldgs to be oriented in match with circumferential + radial grid.



city Hall to be low, not dominating, open and accessible } not like the place in Kafka's The Trial  
 A place for key communal decisions  
 Foreground bldg, not background.



proposed paved plaza (as in European plazas) for use of large urban meetings or ceremonies  
 a "walk to sea" links a chain of public plazas from State House to Harbour

Planners' sketches  
 Source - John Myer

where the nose of the hill was closest to the harbour, giving the site the benefit of both.

In keeping with their stated objectives, the planners located the new streets in such a way that larger areas were given over to pedestrian use. Thus, the principal axis running between Pemberton square and Dock square which was in the form of a vehicular street in the CPB plan, became part of the main pedestrian axis in Myer's. The vehicular connection was made by subdividing this central plot of land in a mirror-image of the CPB plan, so that the bigger wedge-shaped site was along Court street instead of along Sudbury and Hanover street was left in its original position. The City Hall was sited on this central wedge of land, sharing it with the existing Veterans Administration building and two private office blocks whose forms followed the radial lines of the adjacent streets.

Unlike the CPB plan, all the buildings filled their sites from street edge to street edge, giving a sense of definition and enclosure to the streets and open spaces around them. The City Hall itself was wedge shaped. Tremont and Cambridge streets were pushed back westwards into a smoother curve and the two buildings running along this edge followed the same line.

### Attitude to Open Space

"Boston itself has a scale and quality that transcends the sum of its individual historic buildings or sentimental locations. This scale of structure and open space, this intimate mixture of historic symbol and busy commerce, must be maintained and acknowledged in the new plan. Due to the great size and functional demands this is no easy task."<sup>18</sup>

The existing open spaces were all retained, and in many cases, augmented in scale to match the scale of the proposed buildings and wider roads. The new buildings were shaped in conjunction with their corresponding open spaces, making for a better continuity between the different areas.

The second and third objectives make explicit Myer's approach. They can be traced to Lynch's concept of imageability of the built environment. It is no coincidence that his book "The Image of the City" was published in 1960 - the following year. Quoting from the June '59 report -

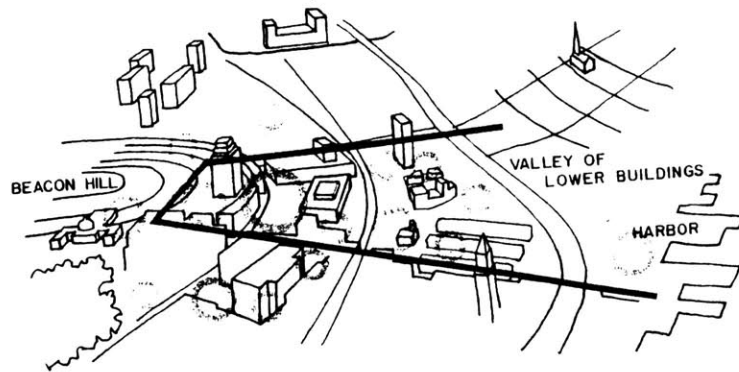
"The Scollay square-Dock square district also performs an important visual function in the city, Here one enters the very heart of the metropolis, here is the key location which could, as the Boston Common does elsewhere, explain to the viewer the interrelationships between many important

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<sup>18</sup> Adams, Howard and Greeley, Technical Report on Final Development Plan for the Government Center Area, June 1959, unpublished, p.12



sections of the city: the office district, the main shopping streets, Beacon Hill, the West End, the North End, the Central Artery, the Markets and the harbour.....The present area does none of this, of course....there is a magnificent opportunity to produce a dramatic foreground for the heart of Boston, and to make clear and visible how the parts of the city fit together."<sup>19</sup>



Sketch by the planners  
Source - Government Center Report, 1959 by AG&H

This explains the meticulous care given to creating visual and pedestrian links which are exhibited in the plan and the desire to form a "valley" of interlinked public open spaces, "running downhill from the State House to Faneuil Hall and someday to the waterfront itself". The "valley" referred to the area lying between Court and Hanover streets and east of Cambridge street. Thus, there was a functional advantage to the location of the City Hall in the central site as well as a symbolic one (since its program permitted a building of low height), so that buildings all around it would be able to look over it to the harbour.

### The Creation of the Plaza

As described earlier in this chapter, the plaza was initially conceived of as a way of emphasizing the importance of the City Hall in the scheme. Yet, there were two other reasons, no less crucial to the plan, which led to its birth. A large open space in front of the City Hall would be in accordance with the planners' desire to keep the built forms at a low height in the central area, enhancing the "valley" effect. This would

<sup>19</sup> ibid p.14.

concur with Lynch's ideas on imageability of the environment as well, by giving people a very identifiable element which they could use to organize their picture of the new project.

The second reason was unrelated to all the earlier ones and hence, more remarkable. The planners had, almost from the earliest stages of the plan, a distinct intention to create a public open space within the project based on the European model of a plaza, where people could congregate not only for political demonstrations and ceremonies, but also use it as a part of their everyday lives, for recreation, sitting, games and contact with other people.<sup>20</sup> Thus, their image of the space was a paved area with fountains and trees at the edges, easily approached from the major areas around it and serving as a focus for the entire scheme. The plaza and the City Hall were seen by them as a unit which, besides being the heart of their proposal physically, was, if built, integral to its ultimate success.<sup>21</sup>

### **Change in the Form of Squares**

The attempt to relate significant or symbolic spaces led to a complete change in the form of the open spaces. They could no longer be enclosed, "room-like" spaces. For if they were to serve as visual and

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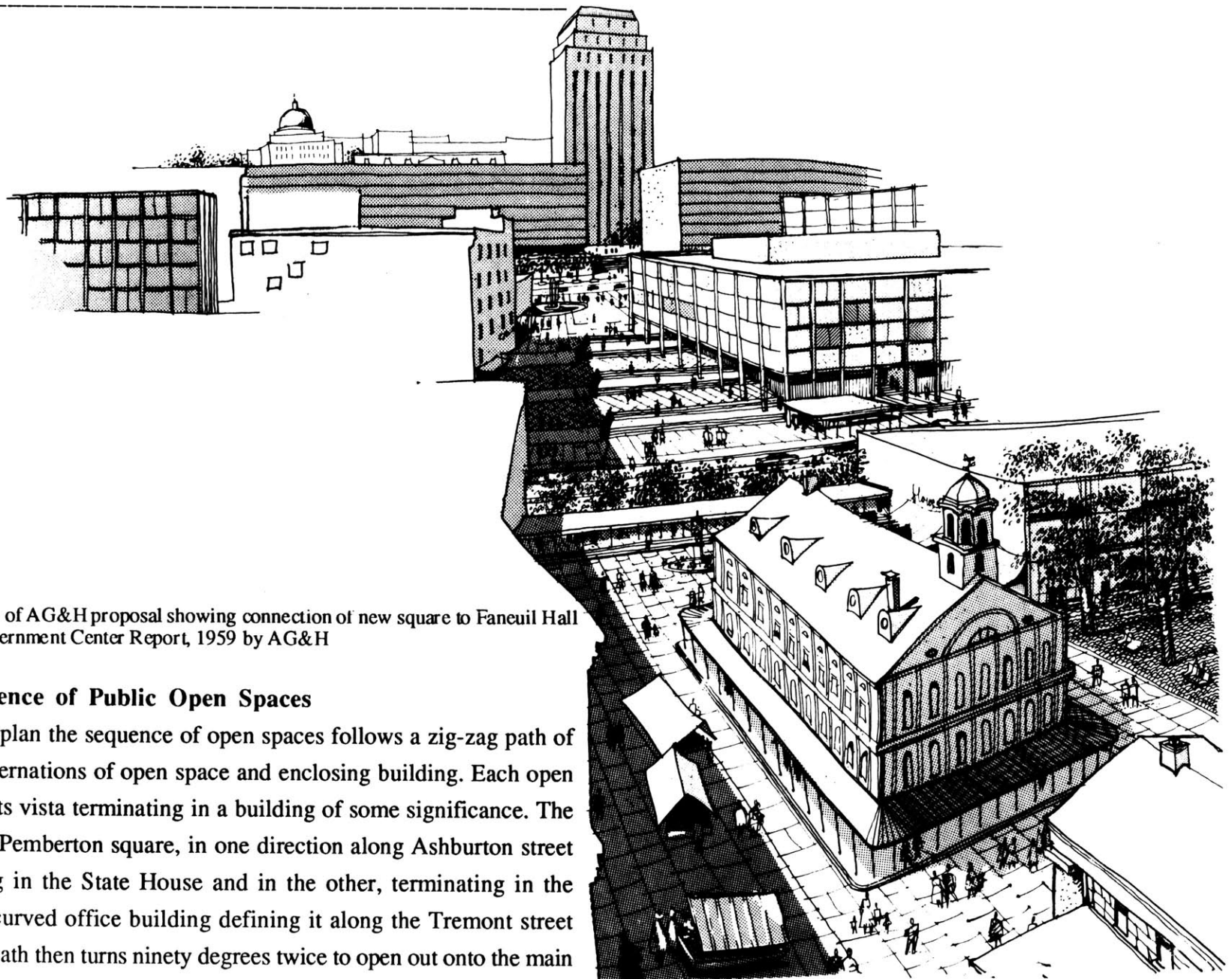
<sup>20</sup> Interview on April 27, 1992 with John Myer, an associate of Adams, Howard and Greeley at the time the plan was conceived.

<sup>21</sup> Letter written by Adams, Howard and Greeley to the CPB in June '59 opposing suggested change by the latter in the City Hall site. Source: MIT Archives, Kevin Lynch files.

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physical connectors they needed to permit views beyond them as well as paths leading not too indirectly through them. This is reflected clearly in the removal of one of the existing buildings defining Pemberton square (on the Somerset street side) to create a direct line of vision between the square and the State House along Ashburton Place. As a consequence, Pemberton square was enlarged from its linear form to a more squarish one. The plan also proposed to open out the north-west corner of the square by demolishing the enclosing building defining it, thus leaving the County Court building standing as a monument dominating the new square. This resulted in transforming Pemberton square from a sheltered, enclosed, elongated space to a larger, much more open junction between paths which connected it to important landmarks (the City Hall and the State House).

Changes in the squares located in the center of the project were even more extreme. Scollay square, of course, was completely replaced by a very generously sized plaza in front of the new city hall. Cornhill was widened and its function as a connector between Adams square and the former Scollay square dramatized into a series of stairs on axis with Faneuil Hall. Quincy Market was retained. Unlike in the CPB plan, in the later plan, buildings were built right up to the edge of the roadline, forming a more continuous street edge. Great care is apparent in the placing of the intended opening in the curved building defining the Tremont street edge so that it lined up with both the County Court building and the new City Hall, forming a visual link between the two parts of the design separated by Tremont street.

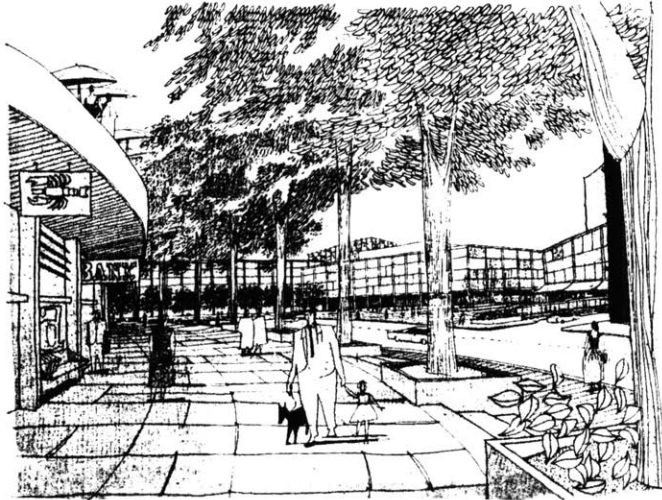


General view of AG&H proposal showing connection of new square to Faneuil Hall  
Source - Government Center Report, 1959 by AG&H

### **The Sequence of Public Open Spaces**

In Myer's plan the sequence of open spaces follows a zig-zag path of planned alternations of open space and enclosing building. Each open space has its vista terminating in a building of some significance. The view from Pemberton square, in one direction along Ashburton street terminating in the State House and in the other, terminating in the enclosing curved office building defining it along the Tremont street edge. The path then turns ninety degrees twice to open out onto the main

Source - Government Center Report, 1959 by AG&H



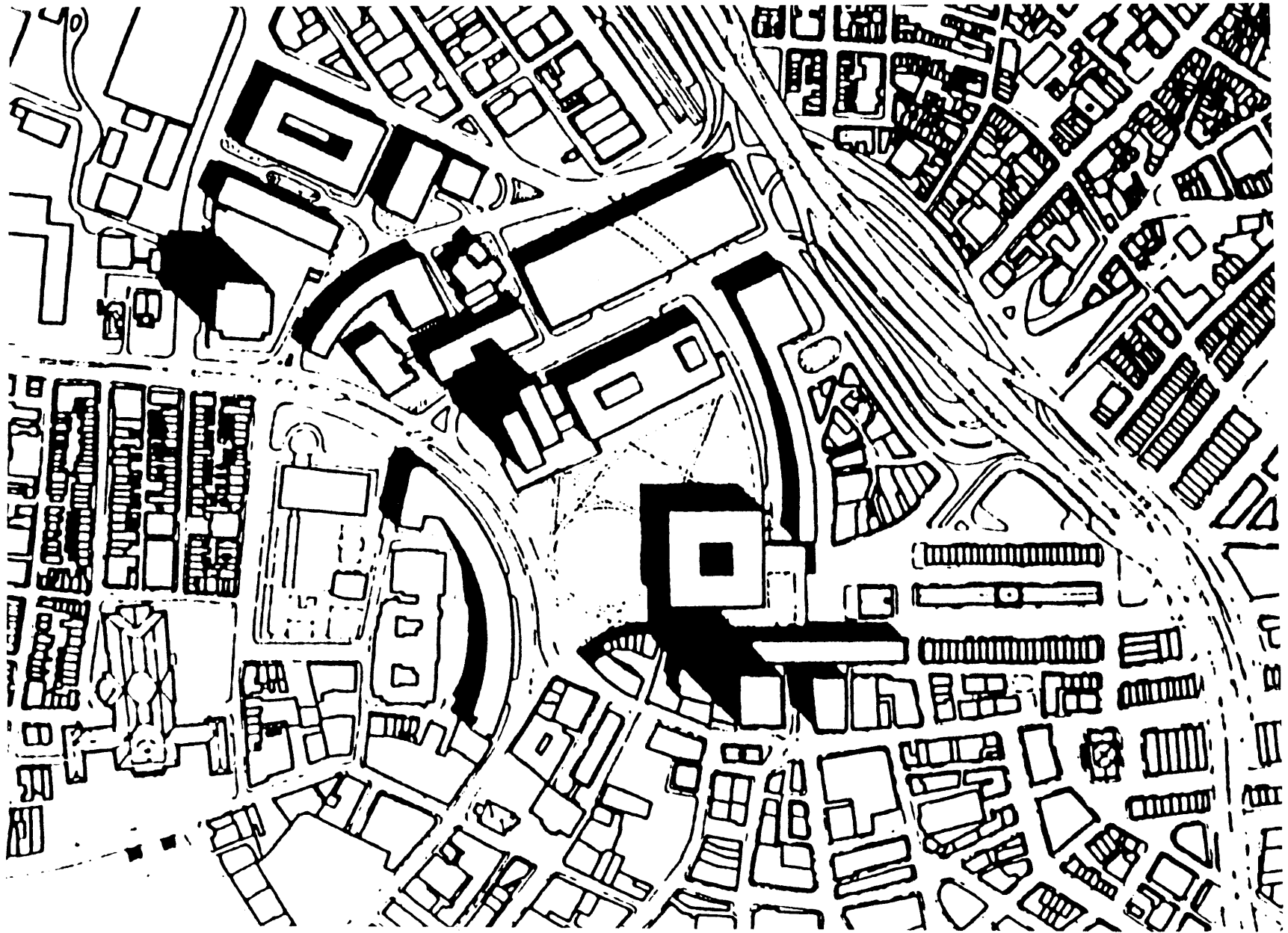
Approaching the new square from Tremont Street



Proposed City Hall seen from the federal square

new plaza and ending in front of the City Hall. Looking back from here one would see the County Courts building through the gap in the Cambridge-Tremont street building edge. At the City Hall, the path once again turns ninety degrees in either direction, one leading down the cascading staircases along Cornhill, focussed on a view of Faneuil Hall, and the other, on the northern side ending in a view of one of the proposed offices west of the Blackstone block. Looking back from either of these places, one would see the curving facades of the Cambridge-Tremont street building. Thus, though the public open spaces were all linked, their connections were deliberately and skillfully orchestrated, so that each retained its character and enclosure by the buildings which defined them.

The one square which Myer's plan did take away without provision of another of greater or equal area was Adams square. This happened presumably as a side effect of the move to create the large plaza in front of the new City Hall, since in order to make room for the plaza, the City Hall building itself had to be shifted more to the rear of its site, taking away the space that was Washington street and Adams square. However, Samuel Adams being a very symbolic figure in Boston, it was probably thought less consequential to sacrifice Dock square in the interests of urban renewal, and thus, Dock square was renamed Adams square in their plan.



The Pei plan - 1961

Source - the office of Pei, Cobb, Freed & Partners

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## The Pei Plan

Pei's 1962 plan was developed from Lynch's 1959 one. At first glance, it appears to share many features with the latter plan. The disposition of the major functions, open spaces, street layout and even the form of some of the main buildings, such as the curved form of the Cambridge-Tremont street office block and the courtyard type of the City Hall seem similar. If one were to verbally list characteristics of the plan, one could say the same things about it as of Myer's plan - it retains or augments the existing public open spaces, creates pedestrian and visual links between different parts of the project and its context and has at its center, a great open space attached to the City Hall.

Yet a closer look makes obvious such essentially contrasting priorities on the parts of the planners that one is astounded at how fundamentally different they really are. In the AH&G scheme, the planners had always stressed that the heart of their design lay in the relationship of the City Hall and its plaza to the rest of the project area and its surroundings. In Pei's plan, the City Hall building was shifted southwards on its site.

This simple move created the most profound impact on the experience and sequence of open spaces, changing the character of the entire project.

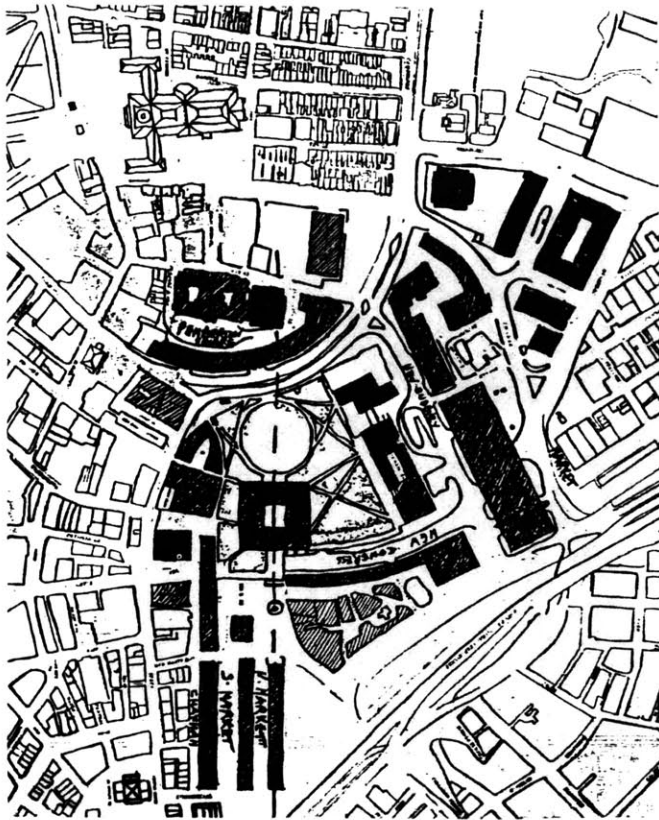


The AH&G Plan



The Pei Plan





Planners' sketch

Source - *Man-Environment Systems* 11, 1981 (Vol. II, Nos. 5&6)

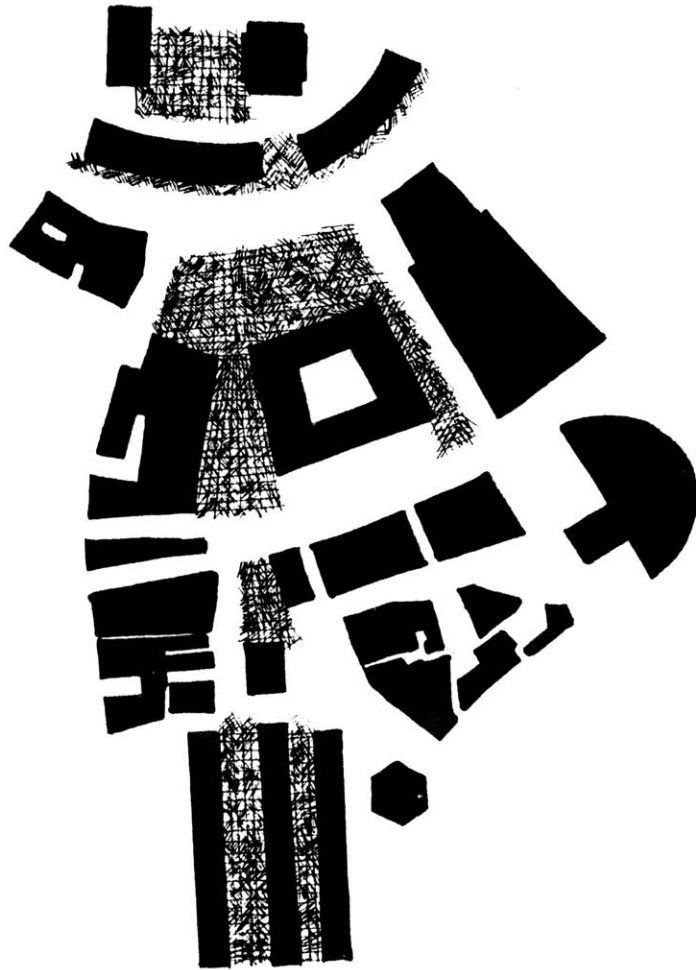
p. 218

### The City Hall and the Plaza

The most easily observable change was that the open space which in Myer's plan had been along only the front edge of the building now wrapped around its northern side as well, in the form of an L-shape, creating a second expanse of almost as imposing a scale as the original one. The building itself, which earlier clearly had one dominant elevation - the western one - now had two. This served to make it more isolated and aloof from its neighbors, which could have been the intention of the designer, to give it more prominence.

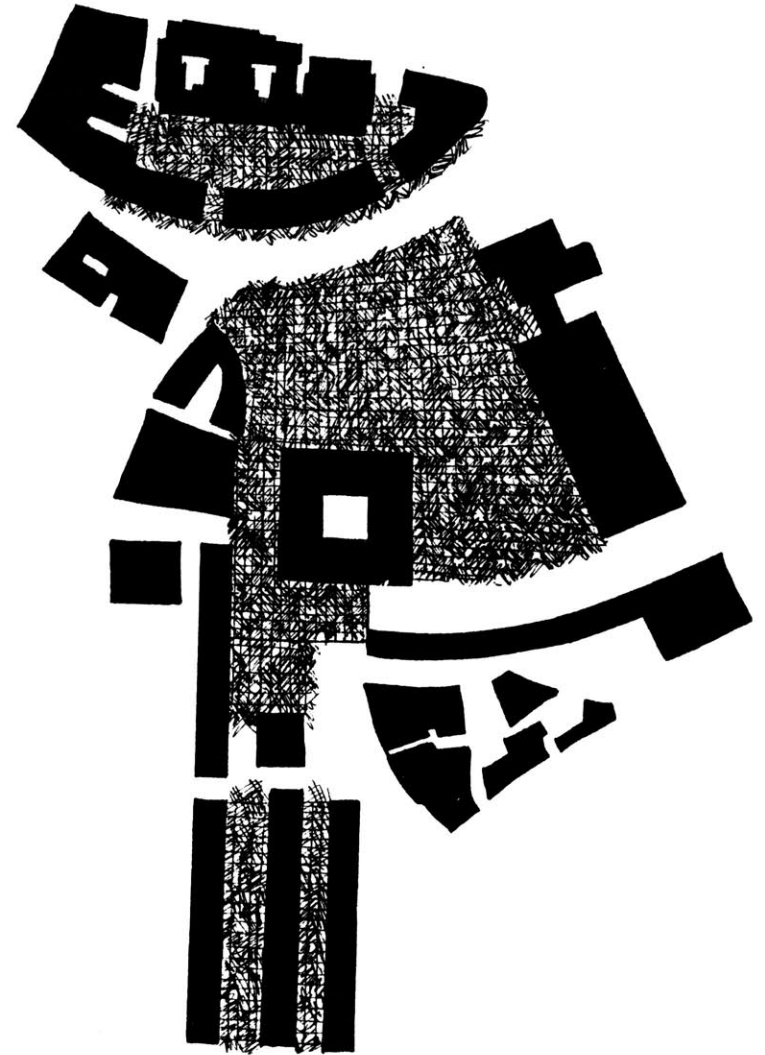
What really divorced the building from its immediate fabric was the fact that it had not only been moved in position, but that its orientation had been changed. In the Myer plan it had been laid out to comply with the radial street pattern and thus, harmonize with the overall newly set out grid, whereas in Pei's plan it followed the grid of Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market, possibly due to its increased proximity to them. Pei's depiction of a symmetrical, perfectly square geometry for the City Hall seems to be derived from the rectilinear forms of these buildings. The center of the courtyard of the City Hall lines up on axis with the central axis of the North Market Row.<sup>22</sup> This axis is continued by Pei in the circular form of the pedestrian paths on the lawn in front of the City Hall. The move of deliberately picking up this geometry as well as simultaneously disregarding the radial street pattern and the orientation

<sup>22</sup> Koebel, Romin, "The Boston Government Center Site Planning Process" in *Man-Environment Systems* 11, 1981 (Vol. II Nos. 5 & 6) p. 218.

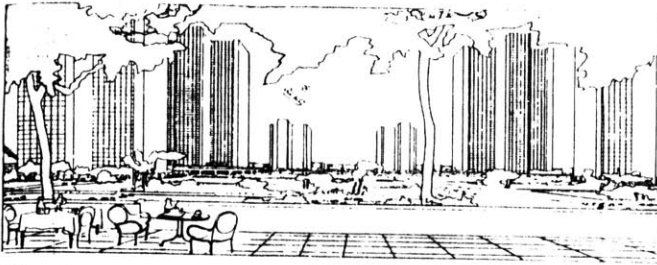


The AH&G Plan

Sequence of Open Spaces

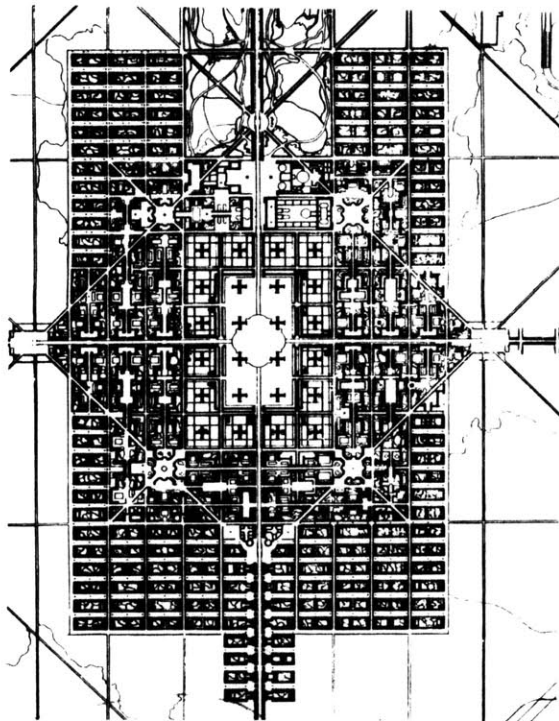


The Pei Plan



View from a terrace restaurant into the Ville Contemporaine, 1922.

Source - *The Master Builders*, Peter Blake



Le Corbusier -  
Plan for a city of 3 million inhabitants, 1922.

of the other buildings seems to be a definite attempt to segregate the building from its context. The creation of a large field of open space on two sides of the building (and possibly, three sides, if one accounts for the street providing an open view of the east elevation as well), strongly suggests Corbusian influences in city planning as in his plans for the Ville Contemporaine - surrounding isolated, individual buildings with green landscaped parkland. All attention was to be focussed on the City Hall itself rather than its relationship with the plaza or their shared connections to the context. Lynch's plan conceived of a "foreground (not background)" building but one which was still modest and well-related to the other spaces and buildings around it. In Pei's plan, the plaza serves merely as "the skirts of the City Hall".<sup>23</sup>

### The Form and Sequence of Public Open Spaces

In the original sequence of public spaces from Pemberton Square, through the plaza to Dock square, Faneuil Hall, Quincy Market and finally the waterfront, the squares all had their own character and the layout permitted anticipation and sequential revelation of each square. Myer's scheme managed to retain this quality though in transformed version. Pei's realigning of the sequence dilutes the experience by straightening out the sight lines too much, eliminating surprise.

The relocation of the building squeezed the Cornhill connection between Faneuil Hall and Tremont street into a narrower cone of vision so that

<sup>23</sup> Interview with John Myer.



Pemberton Square and the County Courts building.



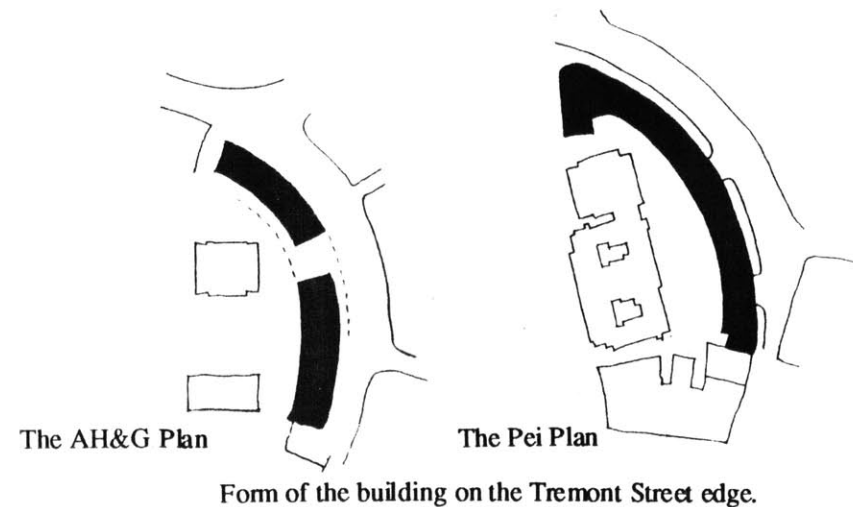
View from Court Street into Pemberton Square.

only a partial view of the former was possible until one actually walked at least halfway towards it from the main plaza. The AH&G plan used the City Hall to frame a complete view of Faneuil Hall. The major pedestrian route in their scheme passed along Cornhill, linking the plaza through a broadening fan-shaped path to Adams square, Faneuil Hall and the lively area of the Markets. In the Pei plan, the major route was the arm of the open space between the Federal Building and the City Hall, leading to the North End. The terminus for this vista was provided not in the inviting form of a public open space but in the curved, private facade of a motor hotel. One cannot help wondering at the appropriateness of such a function for providing an important visual focus to what was proposed as one of the city's prime urban open spaces, especially as the connection to a historic building like Faneuil Hall was played down so deliberately.

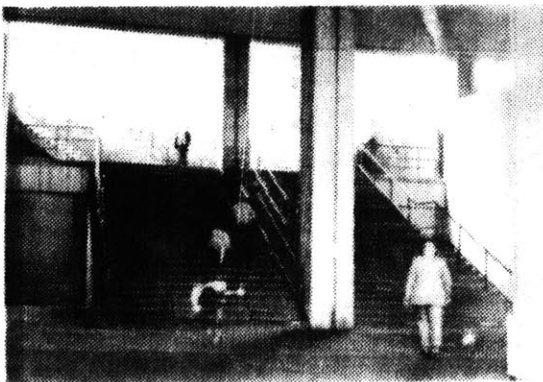
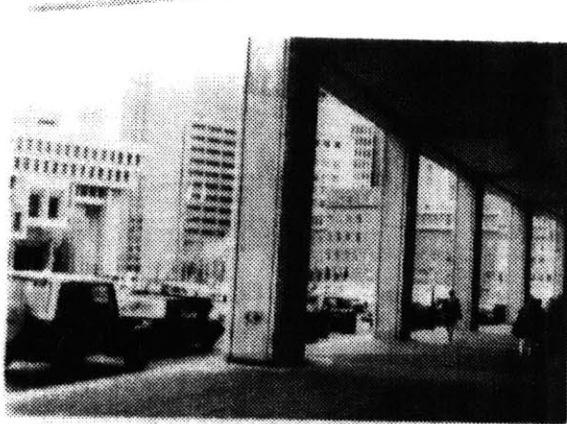
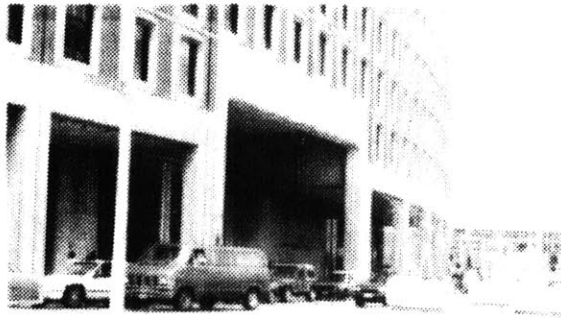
On the western edge as well, the shifting of the City Hall resulted in a major change with regard to its connection to Pemberton square. In Myer's layout, the County Court building and the City Hall were directly lined up and an explicit link made between them by the careful placing of the opening in the curved building fronting Tremont street. In Pei's plan, this relationship is not made. Instead of one opening, there are two, but neither lines up to focus on the City Hall or the County Courts. Rather, both are aligned with longer views - one looking down the open space between the City Hall and the Federal building towards the Blackstone block along Union street. The other view looks down Court street. Here, the curve of the building itself and the curve of Court



View of Faneuil Hall from Cornhill.



Form of the building on the Tremont Street edge.



Sequence of spaces of Tremont Street edge.

street result in the sight lines being shorter, and thus, providing some sense of enclosure as well as an exciting glimpse of the busy life at the intersection of Tremont and Court streets, and serving to form more than just a physical relationship with Pemberton square. Also, the view back from the street into the square focuses on the new court building, creating again, a very perceptible connection.

The square itself is well-defined, enclosed by the sweeping curve of the new building. There was a marked difference in approach to the design compared to Myer's proposals in that no attempt was made to form any link, visual or physical, with the State House. Additionally, the main curving building in Pei's plan was a single, continuous mass whereas in the Myer plan it was two separate pieces slightly out of alignment with each other in order to draw attention to the opening between them, showing more sensitivity to the experience of the pedestrian.

The City Hall was moved further back on its eastern edge, too. It now sat as a definite terminus to Washington street, forming a link to the Downtown and Financial district which Myer's plan did not do. It also allows a more direct link between the old State House and the City Hall. However, this also squeezed the site between Union and Congress street to a long, very narrow strip lying just in front of the Blackstone block. In the Lynch scheme, the buildings and streets occupying this site had been scaled so as to form a transition between the City Hall

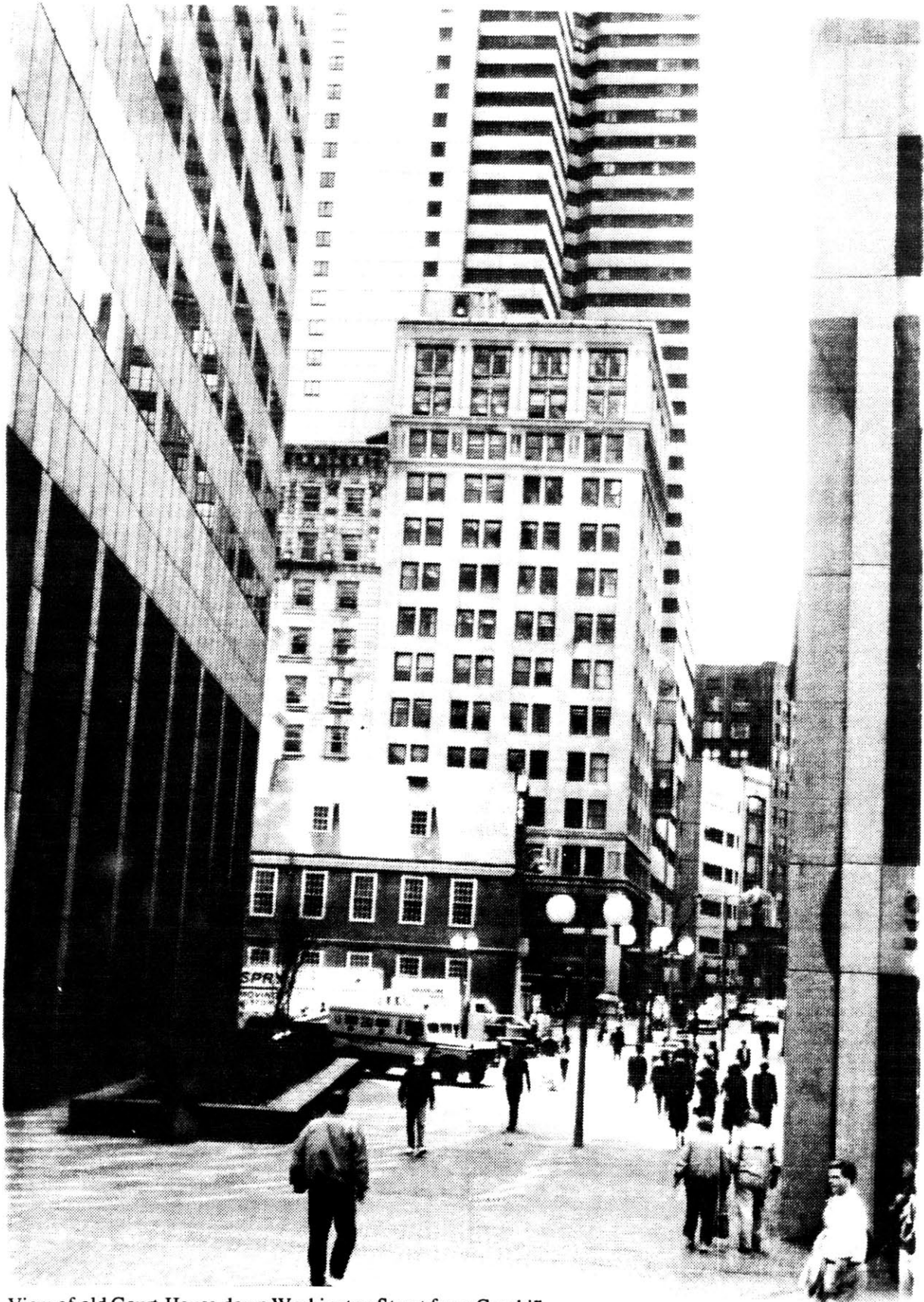


The corner of Court and Tremont Street forms one of the more interesting spatial experiences in the plaza.

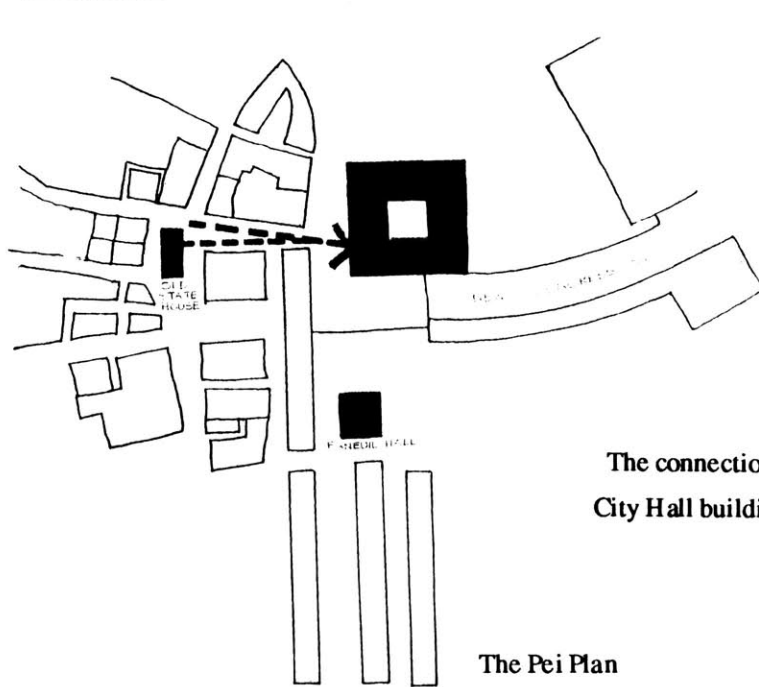
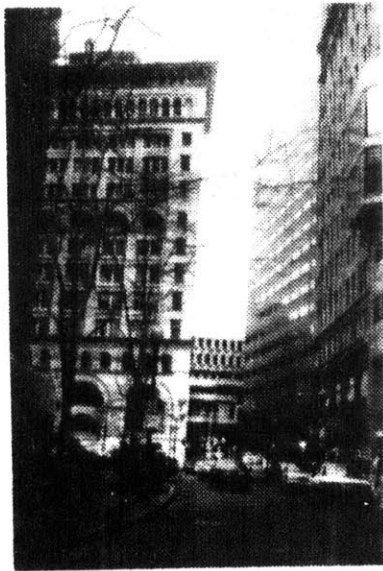




Edge of subway station at corner of Court and Tremont Streets.

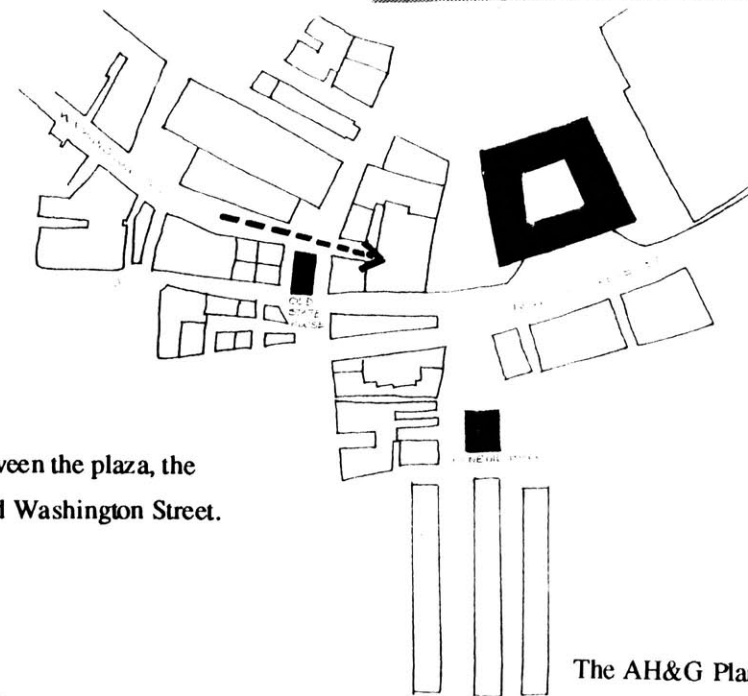


View of old Court House down Washington Street from Comhill.



The Pei Plan

The connection between the plaza, the City Hall building and Washington Street.



The AH&G Plan

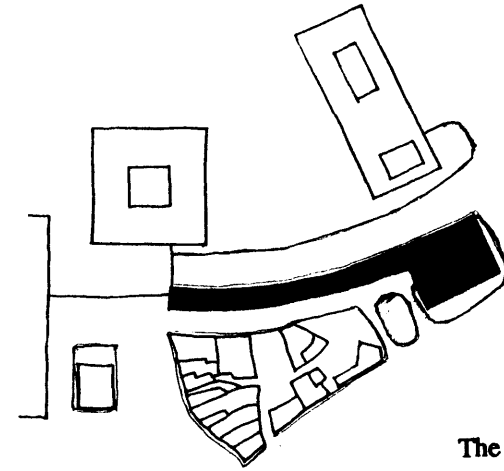
scale and that of the Blackstone block.<sup>24</sup> Pei's plan proposed a long, curving, monolithic building (designated as a motor hotel cum office block), which was never built due to its narrow dimensions.<sup>25</sup>

It is worth noting here that in the Myer plan the Federal building was located away from the City Hall, at the corner of Washington and Court streets and a private office block occupied most of the northern edge of the City Hall site. In Pei's plan, when this building was relocated in its present position, the liaison officer for the Federal government insisted that the part of Hanover street intervening between the City Hall site and the Federal building be removed as it represented a source of noise, traffic, etc. Perhaps this was one of the reasons which led Pei to move the City Hall away from that edge - the increased virtual proximity to the other building.

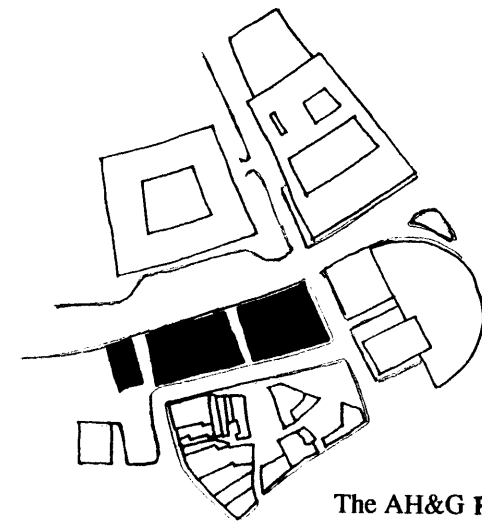
Myer's proposal showed the open space as a hard surface which extended even beyond the City Hall building to front a private office block adjacent to it. A major reason for this was to open out the plaza to as many of the surrounding streets as possible. This is what motivated

<sup>24</sup> Interview with John Myer.

<sup>25</sup> This site was later split along Sudbury street, into two separate ones in order to give access to the North End subway entrance from Congress street. The long, narrow strip is the site on which the Holocaust Memorial is to be built. The rectangular site next to it, between Sudbury and Hanover streets is being used to locate one of the multi-functional vent buildings for the Central Artery Tunnel project.

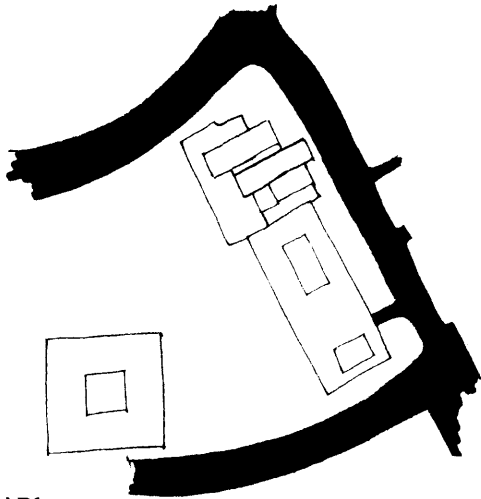


The Pei Plan

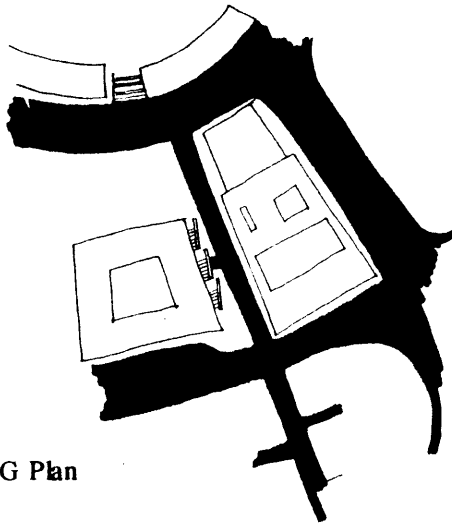


The AH&G Plan

Transition built area between Blackstone block and plaza.



The Pei Plan



The AH&amp;G Plan

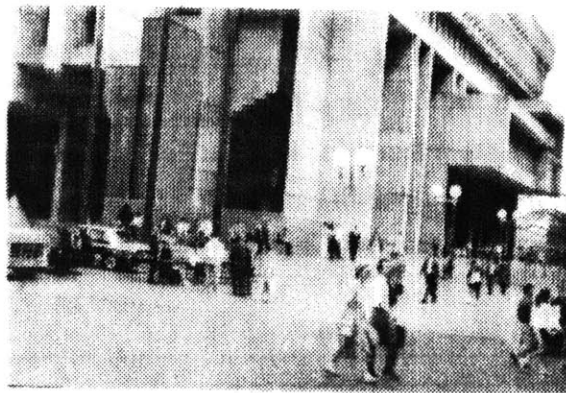
### Comparison of Hanover Street edge conditions

the elimination of the Sears Crescent building in their plan.<sup>26</sup> Pei's 1962 drawings indicated a grassed, but treeless surface which fronted only across the City Hall site. There was an earlier version of this plan which proposed, instead of the plaza, a tree-filled park like place which Pei intended as a complement to the Boston Common.<sup>27</sup> Only the central circular space was left unplanted, forming a frame for the City Hall. This would have made difficult the use of the space for large political demonstrations and ceremonies, besides giving the building a more monumental, aloof air. Further, it would have completely negated the purpose of siting the building in this central location in the first place, since its visibility would have been to a large extent and from most vantage points, rather obscured. Had Pei himself designed the building, this version of the plan may well have been realized.

Even in the grassed version, the details of the way the pedestrian paths were laid out are revealing - they follow, in front of the City Hall, a symmetrical, circular route located on axis with the center of the building - definitely a formal, ceremonial gesture. Myer included a fountain and trees in the plaza; it is interesting to observe that the fountain was placed not in front of the City Hall, but partly aligned with the Cornhill path and partly in front of the office building nearby. Once again, this illustrates the intention of the designers to create, not a

<sup>26</sup> Interview with John Myer

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*



Sequence of spaces leading to Faneuil Hall from plaza.

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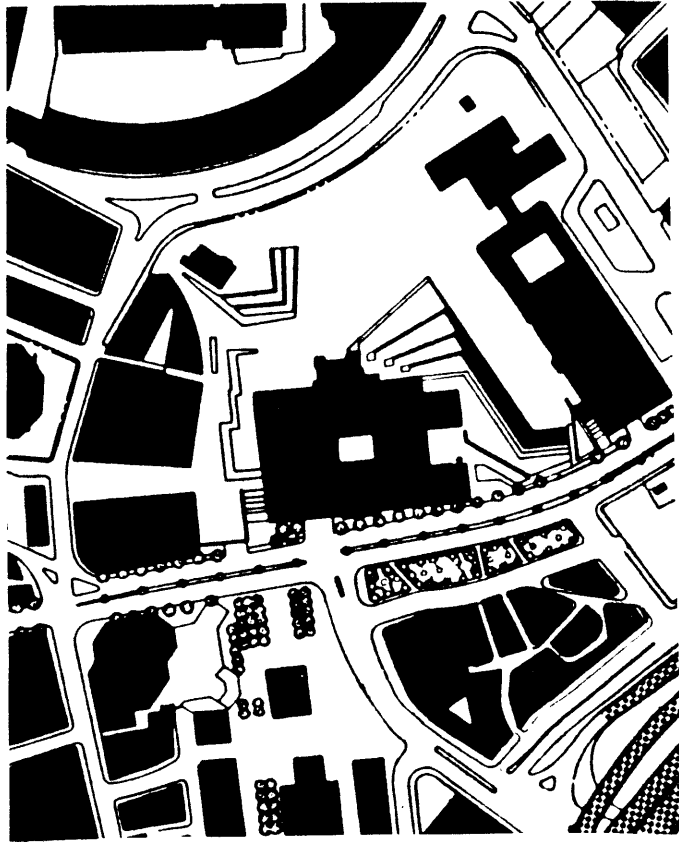
monumental space but an interesting and enjoyable experience for the pedestrian.

Together, all these facts bear out a fundamental difference in the use the two designers envisaged for the open space. On the one hand, there was the vision of a more secular, well-used public space, inviting people into it with its strong connections in every direction to the other squares around it. On the other, there was the formal, manicured lawn - more symbolic in its intent as a public space than literally useable by the people.



The plaza - in front of the Federal building.





The plaza as built.

## The Plaza as it Exists Today

### The Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles Plan:

There is nothing innately good about a plaza.<sup>28</sup>

She asked me to stay and she told me to sit anywhere

So I looked around and I noticed there wasn't a chair.<sup>29</sup>

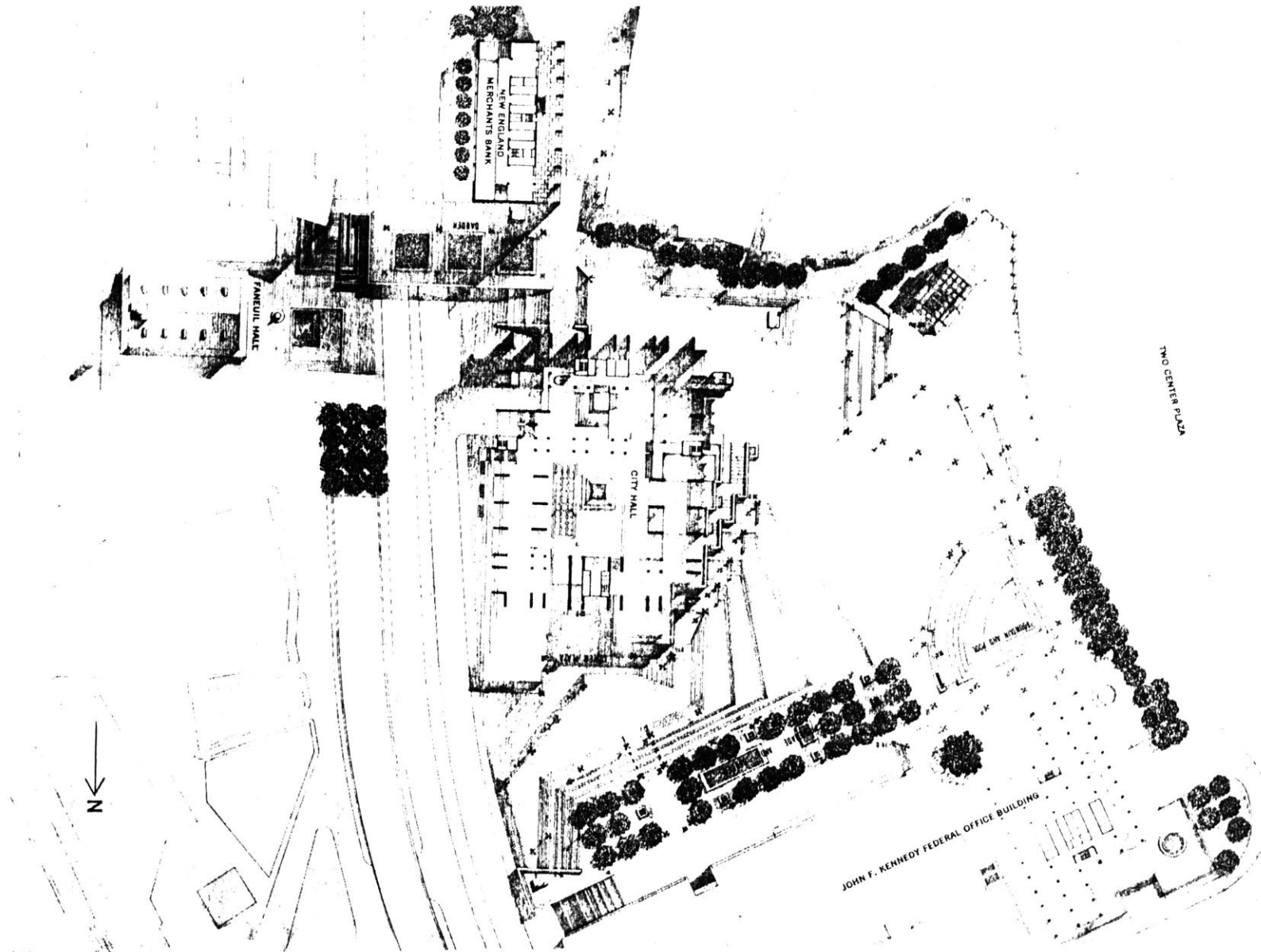
Naturally, since the competition called only for the design of the City Hall and surrounding open spaces, the architects proposals had a restricted area of influence within the overall project. However, the changes that they did make contradicted the intentions inherent in Pei's master plan dramatically, and their consequences reached much further than the actual site of the City Hall. The major change they made was in their conception of the open space not as a green area, as suggested in the Pei plan, but a hard-surfaced urban civic square. This immediately threw the balance visually between this open space and the buildings around it, making it seem even more vast and disproportionate than it actually was. An expanse of green grass and trees set amidst huge blocks of concrete buildings and streets and an expanse of unpatterned paving in the same space create a profoundly different experience for both the passer-by and the user. Each offers a completely altered character and image of the space and nature of the activities which could

<sup>28</sup> Hedman, Richard with Jaszewski, Andrew, *Fundamentals of Urban Design*, 1984, p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> The Beatles, Norwegian Wood.

take place there. The sense of enclosure in each case would need to be correspondingly different. Pei had essentially envisioned a park-like space, suggesting broader stretches of ground and longer views. The idea of enclosure and definition of the space through buildings thus probably seemed to him, not of primary consequence; parks do not inherently demand this, being in most instances a representation of nature - free-flowing and with a sense of limitlessness, of openness. The buildings, besides the City Hall, did not form the open space in his plan - it was the radical change in its treatment as compared to its surroundings that he was probably relying on to give the space definition, assuming he was concerned with the issue of definition. When Kallmann, etc. changed this treatment, immediately the lack of three-dimensional definition became a crippling problem, dooming the new plaza to appear too amorphous and vast even before it was built.

One of the positive changes they made was that their proposed City Hall building was more rectangular in plan than Pei's plan indicated, squeezing the northern arm of the plaza into a more perceptibly secondary space with regard to the western one. It further restored a sort of emphasis to the front of the building by the elongation of the east-west elevations. Yet, in their building, Kallmann, etc. shifted the position of the interior courtyard further north than in Pei's master plan, breaking the imaginary axial line set up by the latter through the center of the court and the center of the North Market Row, destroying still another of the few relationships which Pei's building had with its context.



Plan of the plaza by Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles  
Source - The Architectural Forum, Jan-Feb 1969, p. 38

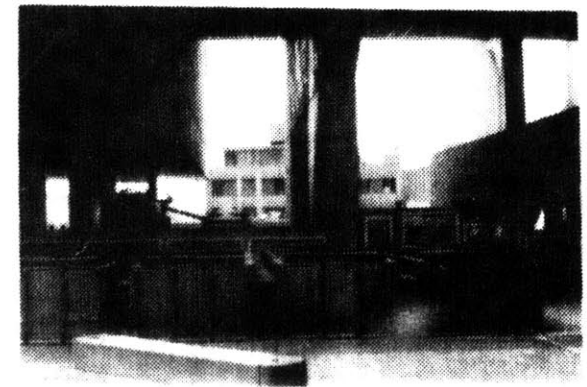
The architects of the City Hall intended the interior courtyard to be used as a continuation of the the sequence of open spaces from the plaza. Yet the location of this court at an entire floor level above the level of the plaza, thus necessitating a staircase to access it didn't do much to lure people into it. Most people don't even know that it exists.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the staircase which connects it to the plaza is oriented perpendicular to the direction of motion of people walking across the plaza from Tremont street, again not calling attention to its purpose, especially since from the side facing the street, its articulation resembles a barricaded brick wall rather than an invitation to ascend. It is too bald, bulky, clumsy and not human-scaled in its details. To compound the problem, the architects, for some reason, filled up the center of the court with an immense pyramidal skylight serving the basement levels. It seems almost absurd when one considers the fact that a small, well-defined and enclosed courtyard which is supposed to be at least archetypally, an empty space, was filled up by the architects while the vast scaleless sea of paving which formed the plaza, and which needed activities and objects in it to give it some sense of purpose and human scale, was left barren and severe. As a result, neither space can accommodate activity effectively.

**Micro-climate:** The plaza seems to have been designed with some ideal, unchanging climate in mind - not too hot, but warm and sunny, with a pleasant summer breeze blowing across it permanently. What actually

<sup>30</sup> Temin, Christine, "Anti-establishment Art at City Hall" in The Boston Globe, May 18, 1988, p.31



Precise detailing ....



The interior courtyard.

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happens, of course is that for at least eight months of the year the space is unusable. In summer, it is often too hot for large portions of the day, there being no sheltering elements in the main plaza. In winter, winds blow too strongly across the plaza and the floor is slippery and snow-covered since the budget did not allow for snow-melting devices to be installed beneath the floor surface. Had more enclosure been provided the plaza would have been less infested with winds, and created a more useable space in at least part of the winter. "Open plazas, where street openings draw in wind from every direction ... feature beautiful wind spirals throughout the year - dust columns in summer and snow flurries in winter. This is one of the pretty spectacles made possible by modern advances in city planning!"<sup>31</sup>

Apparent Size - The apparent size of the space is increased because of the sight lines from the plaza extending virtually endlessly in all directions except along the Center Plaza building and along Sears Crescent. This also proves to be too visually distracting, drawing attention away from the plaza itself. It does not aid in creating any sense of enclosure, becoming another factor to aggravate the scalelessness of the square. One can even see through the City Hall building itself; though the architects meant this as a positive factor - possibly reducing the bulky aspect of the building and relating the plaza visually to the

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<sup>31</sup> Sitte, Camillo, *The Art of Building Cities*, 1945, p.87



Interest and activity created at the Tremont Street edge is not echoed in the ...



.....open views and lack of enclosure down Cambridge Street.

context beyond, it merely adds to the overall amorphousness of the space.

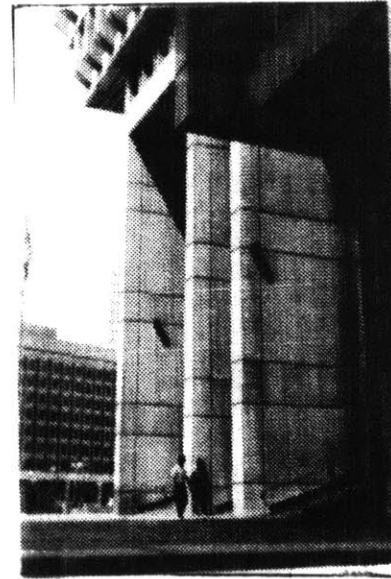
Current Use: The plaza, designated as an exclusively pedestrian space finds at least some of its area being used today as a parking lot.

Enclosure - The plaza already suffered from the problem of insufficient definition in the plan created by Pei but the condition was aggravated by Kallmann's decision to have a vast sea of paving with few trees. "The 19th century .. merely turned the void around a building into a tray or platter on which the particular structure was presented."<sup>32</sup> The area of paving is not what determines the size of the square but the volume created by the surrounding buildings.

Relation of City Hall building to Plaza: The building dominates too much and appears aloof from people, which is interestingly, the opposite of the stated intention of it's architects.

Relationship of Plaza to Streets: The plaza is exposed on its widest side completely to fast-moving vehicular traffic.

Scale: The magnitude of the plaza is one of its biggest problems. The Piazza de San Marco, Venice and the Campo in Siena fit almost twice in



Monumental scale....



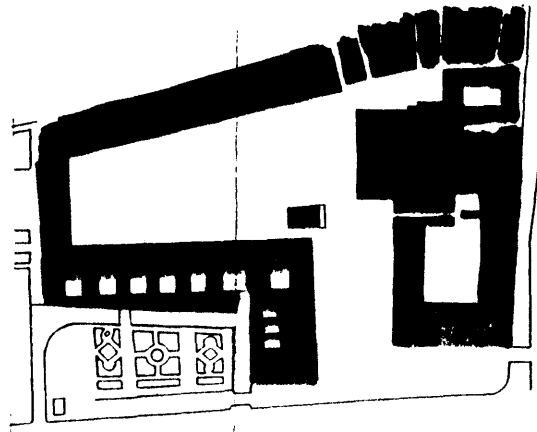
"A space for walking through ..."

<sup>32</sup> Zucker, Paul, Town and Square, 1959, p.17

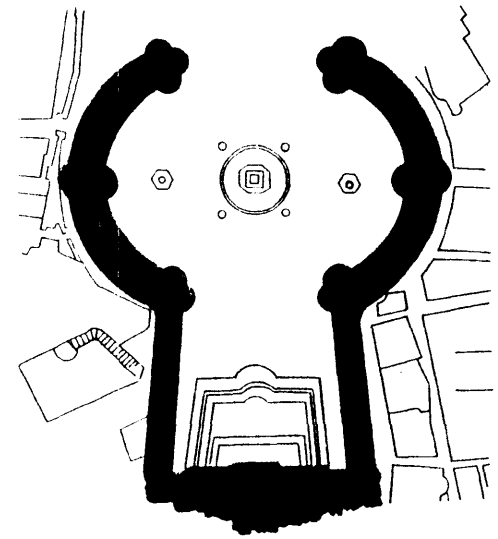




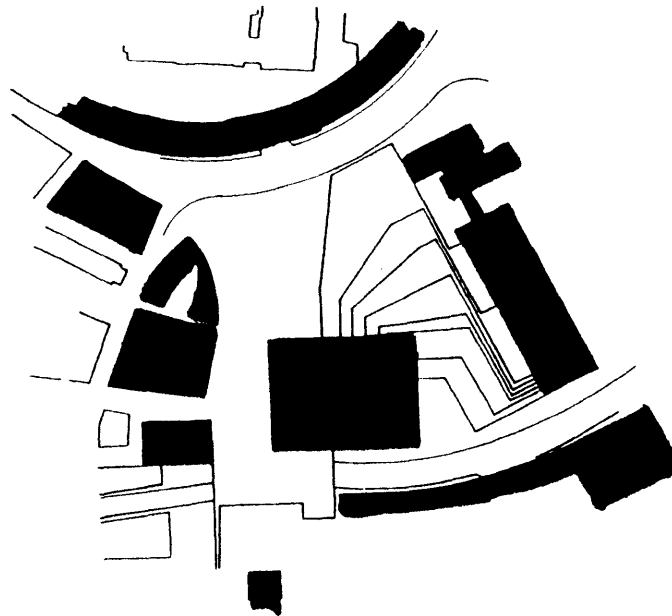
Vast void on the eastern edge of the plaza.



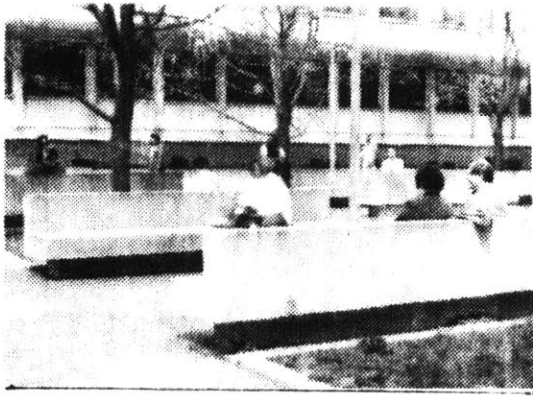
St. Mark's Square, Venice.



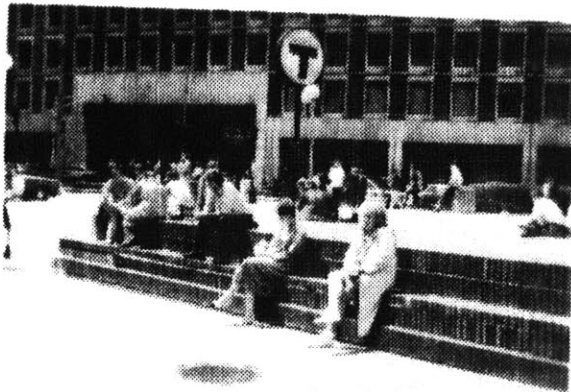
St. Peter's Square, Rome.



City Hall Plaza, Boston



Inappropriate seating leads to people making their own....



it.<sup>33</sup> The BRA actually considered its size a positive factor, comparing its grand scale to St. Peter's square in Rome. The nearby tower of the JFK building does nothing towards giving any human scale to the plaza.

Lack of Activities: the Federal building offers a dead edge to the plaza, as do both the western and eastern boundaries, for these are formed by roads with fast-moving traffic. The southern edge represents the only activity in the space and not surprisingly, proves insufficient to give life to the entire plaza, whose magnitude demands more than edge activities in any case, to enliven it.

Landscaping: There is not a single tree in the main plaza for shade or accent; the benches, though arranged opposite each other, seemingly to encourage conversation, are too far apart (9') to fulfill this purpose. They are also immovable, denying the user the option of choosing another location to place his seat.

Levels: The fountain area with its sunken seating area once provided a pleasant micro-environment for people to lounge around in. The decision to sink the space was motivated reportedly by the desire to exclude the traffic passing along Cambridge street. Today, and apparently since several years now, the fountain doesn't spout.

<sup>33</sup> Hedman, Richard with Jaszewski, Andrew, Fundamentals of Urban Design, 1984, p. 74.



Dock Square at 12.30 p.m. on a warm, sunny day.



City Hall Plaza at 12.30 p.m. on the same day.

Materials: The brick paving relates the plaza to the rest of the city; it is a historically used material in Boston. Yet, in conjunction with the hard concrete facade of the city hall, it appears overly severe. This is, of course, related to the scale and design of the entire plaza - were it a smaller area in question, or if the relation between the plaza and surrounding bldgs. was more interactive, this may not have been such a disadvantage.

Safety: At night the northern arm of the plaza connecting the North End to Cambridge street is not perceived as a safe route to take, mostly due to the lack of activity and people nearby, and the lack of adequate lighting.

Subway Entrance: The little brick partial pyramid which forms the entrance to the subway stands in the plaza, neither as a building, nor as a part of the landscaping. It does make for a lot of activity though, and in that sense, is a real boon to the square. People enjoy sitting on its peripheral low battered walls, facing outwards from the plaza on to Tremont and Court streets.

Symbolic Message - The architects meant the city hall to "belong to the people of Boston" and designed spaces within the building for public use, such as the courtyard. But they did not consider the role of the plaza as integral to this or apparently, the relation of the building to the plaza. As a result, the non-verbal message the space sends across is directly the opposite of what they intended - one of power, dominance,



Sears Crescent and the subway stop.

Source - BRA brochure published on the Government Center Project, 1970.

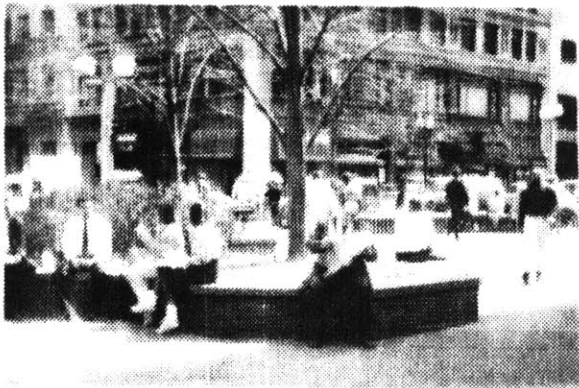


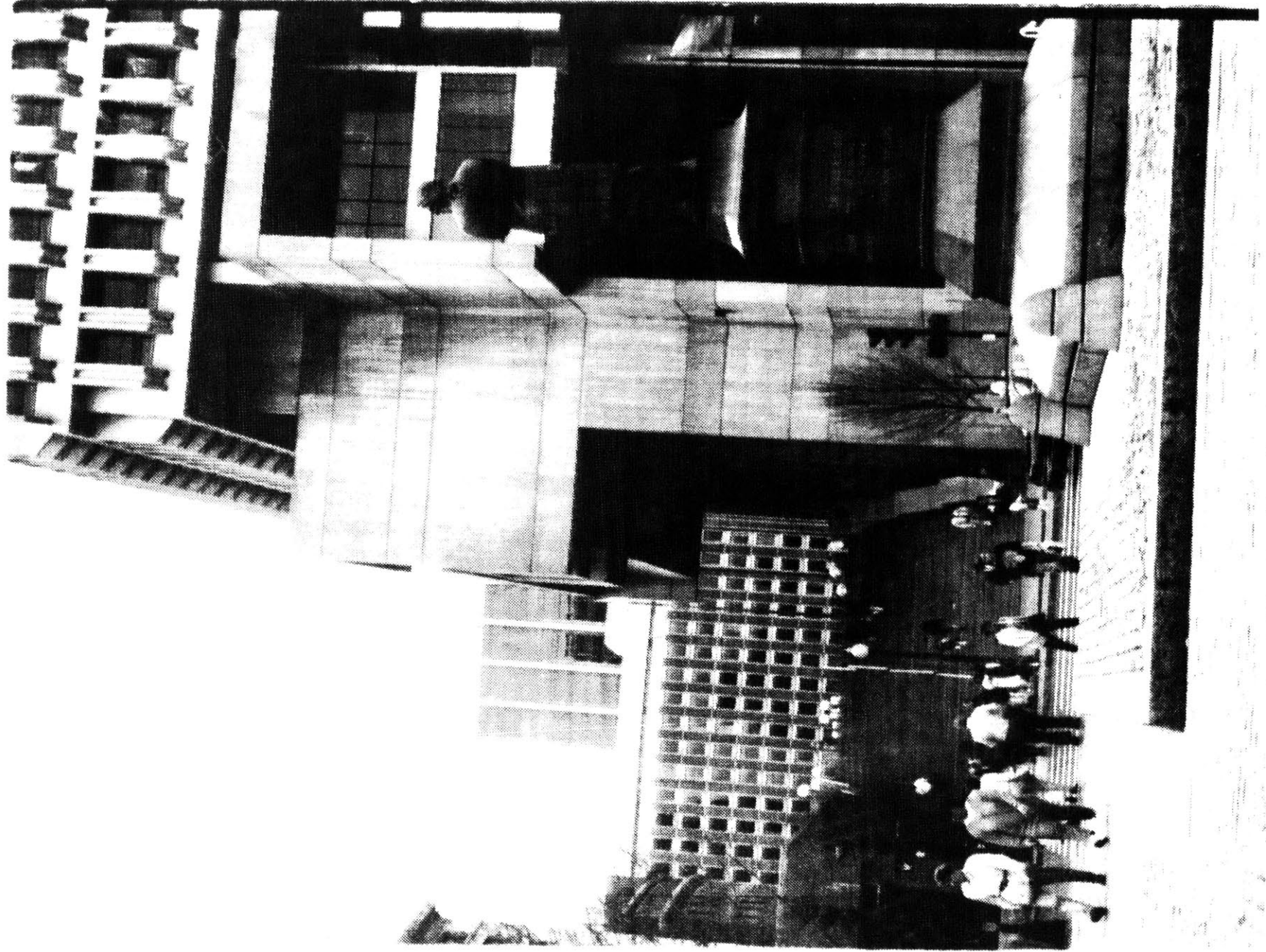
distance - not one of accessibility, accomodation and invitation. As a public space, it does not succeed, in part because of the shortcomings of its physical design and in part because of the designers' reluctance in conceiving it as a public place to be used in more than the few ways they desired. Thus, it only succeeds in alienating the very people it should serve.



While City Hall Plaza - a "public space" lies empty, the nearby streets and squares are filled with people.

(The photographs were taken at the same time in all four places.)





View of Comhill connection to City Hall Plaza from Adams Square.



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## Summation of Case Study

Urban spaces, from any time in history or any society on earth can tell us much about the quality of life enjoyed by its people. Some spaces are clearly the result of democratic usage, others suggest military purpose, pomp, and the monumentality of government.<sup>34</sup>

The trouble is, the spaces of this plan are monumental. They are designed so that men may confront buildings rather than each other.<sup>35</sup>

Segregation, isolation, compartmentalization, and sterilization seem to be the guiding principles of urban growth and urban renewal.<sup>36</sup>

The design of public plazas today is complicated from its very inception partly due to the limited scope of the commissions offered to any one architect - that is, he may be given only one of the many buildings surrounding a plaza to design or just the landscaping of the plaza itself, and hence, not have the total effect within his control. However, in the case of the Govt. Center urban renewal plan Pei, Cobb and partners had 60 acres of the city center to shape almost completely as they willed. Of these, all of 16 acres were given over to open spaces. The opportunity was a unique one to create a public space or sequence of public spaces of truly memorable experience. The approach they chose

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<sup>34</sup> French, J.S., *Urban Space: A Brief History of the City Square*, 1978, p. 9

<sup>35</sup> Heckscher, August. *Open Spaces: The Life of American Cities*, 1977, p. 23

<sup>36</sup> Oldenburg, Ray, *The Great Good Place*, 1989, p. 285

was in part, to be blamed on some of the theories of urban design, or rather, urban renewal, prevalent at the time. Modernist notions of architecture definitely seemed to be the guiding influence in his relocation of the City Hall building and its relationship, or lack of it, to its surroundings. Pei subordinated the entire scheme to that single building, destroying in the process, the possibility of an integrated sequence of built and open spaces. There can be no doubt about the deliberateness of his decision in siting the building since from the very beginning he had as a reference, the earlier plan by AH&G with its meticulously interrelated spaces. Myer's plan was based on perceptible, experiential relationships, on the sequential, changing viewpoints of a person in motion; Pei's was based on imperceptible conceptual relationships such as formal axes, on some predetermined, abstract principles of geometric order, focussing the attention of the user on one building.

The designers of each plan had their own set of motivations and justifications for their approach to the design of public open spaces. One of the most ironic aspects of the history of the successive plans drawn up by the different designers is that each chose to overlay his own interpretation of the project on that of his predecessor's, either without taking into consideration the motivations which underlay the earlier design or intentionally ignoring or negating them. At the same time, they did not completely discard the earlier plan (of course, in the case of Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles, their freedom to do so was restricted by the competition requirements). This led to damaging the

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coherence of the project as a whole. The present plaza is an ample illustration of what this lack of empathy between successive planners can lead to.

Each planner had a model on which the design of the plaza was to be based - AH&G had no specific place in mind, except the normative image of a European plaza. Pei had a model almost completely contradicting this - the Boston Common. How much of his park-like proposal was inspired by this model and how much by town planning influences like Corbusier's 1920's designs is hard to know. Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles had the Campo in Siena as their model. Even if one leaves their choice of model unchallenged, the major problem was that the designers, in their application of the model to their proposal, used it only superficially to inform their design, imitating two-dimensional effects such as the floor finish and geometry.

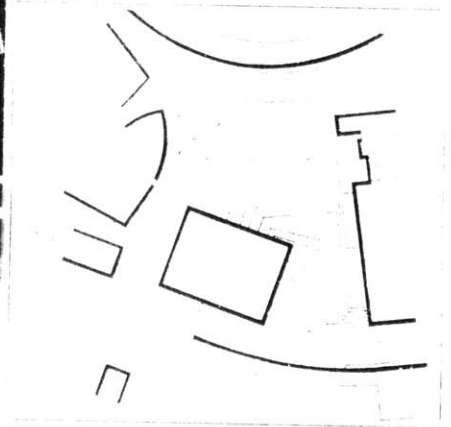
Equally dubious is their attitude to the function of the plaza - "...a plaza is essentially a place of passage."<sup>37</sup> They also expected that it would be used for political demonstrations and ceremonies, of course. But how many demonstrations and meetings can one expect in front of the headquarters of a city government? One per week? Per month? How many rallies and protests and celebrations would justify the use of a

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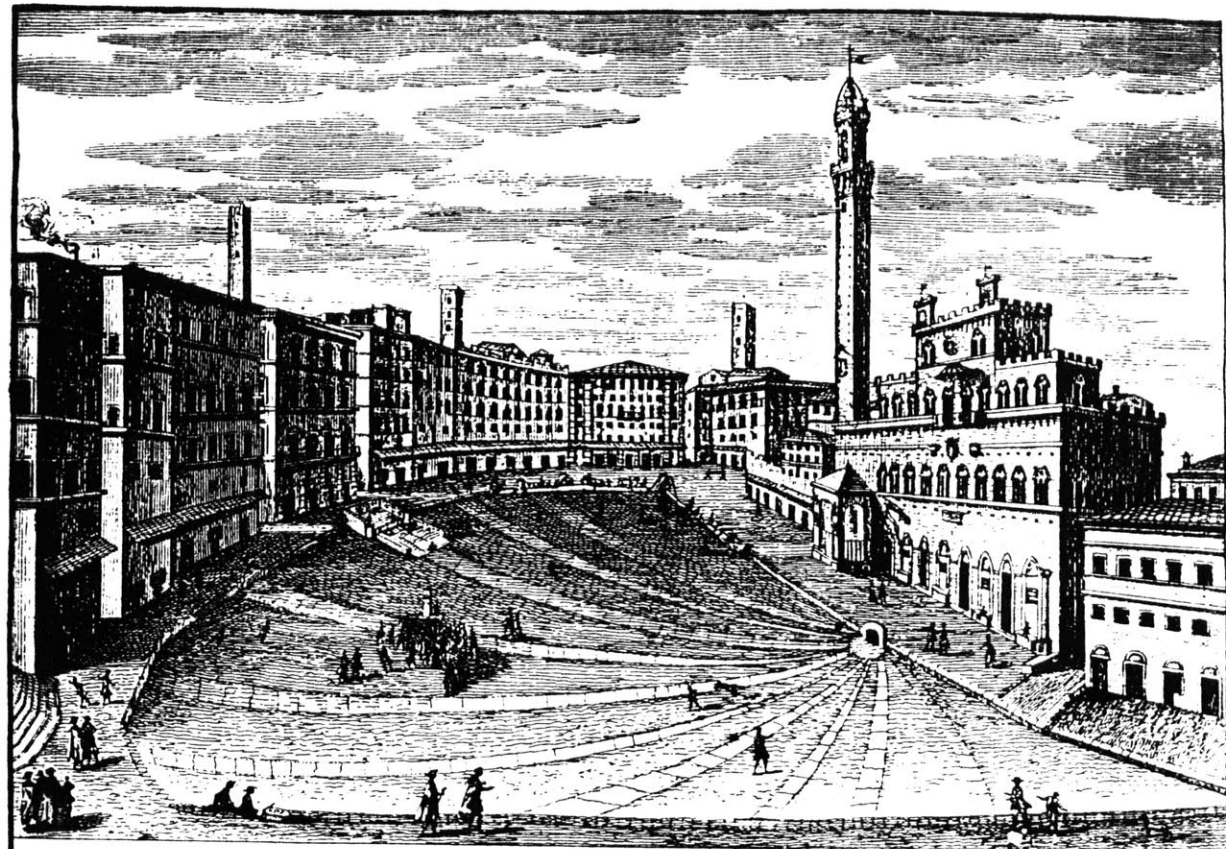
<sup>37</sup> Kallmann, Gerhard, "A Great Plaza for Boston's Government Center" in *Architectural Record*, March 1964.



Aerial view of the plaza and surroundings.  
Source - BRA brochure published on the Government Center Project, 1970.



Plan

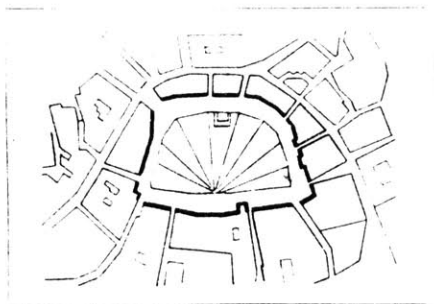


*Veduta della Piazza di Siena*

*Dopo Vinci, Piazzi, Corti e Tosi*

The Campo at Siena.

Source - Burkhardt, Titus, *Siena, The City of the Virgin*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1960, p. 109.



Plan

Source for both plans - *Architectural Review*, June 1970, p. 399

space of so great a magnitude in the center of the city solely for such purposes? A quick check in the Boston Globe index revealed the following count of reported happenings in City Hall Plaza over the past few years.<sup>38</sup>

1991 - 4 political

1990 - 1 political

1989 - 3 political

1988 - 5 political, 3 other (other included events like the installation by an artist on anti-establishment art, a market set up by local Massachusetts farmers and a gathering of 500 elementary school children singing hymns.)

1987 - 3 political, 2 other (other being the Freedom Trail race and an event called "grime-fighters' games".)

The designers' attitude reflects the inexplicable desire prevalent even today, to segregate activities in individual specialized settings. Why can't a civic square of a city be designed so as to accommodate other kinds of activities which form part of public life as well as the political ones? This would hardly make the rallies and demonstrations held there appear less militant and the people of Boston could get so much more out of the plaza were it more conducive to activities other than "walking through". Making it adaptable to the whole range of Boston's climatic conditions would go a long way towards ensuring more frequent use.

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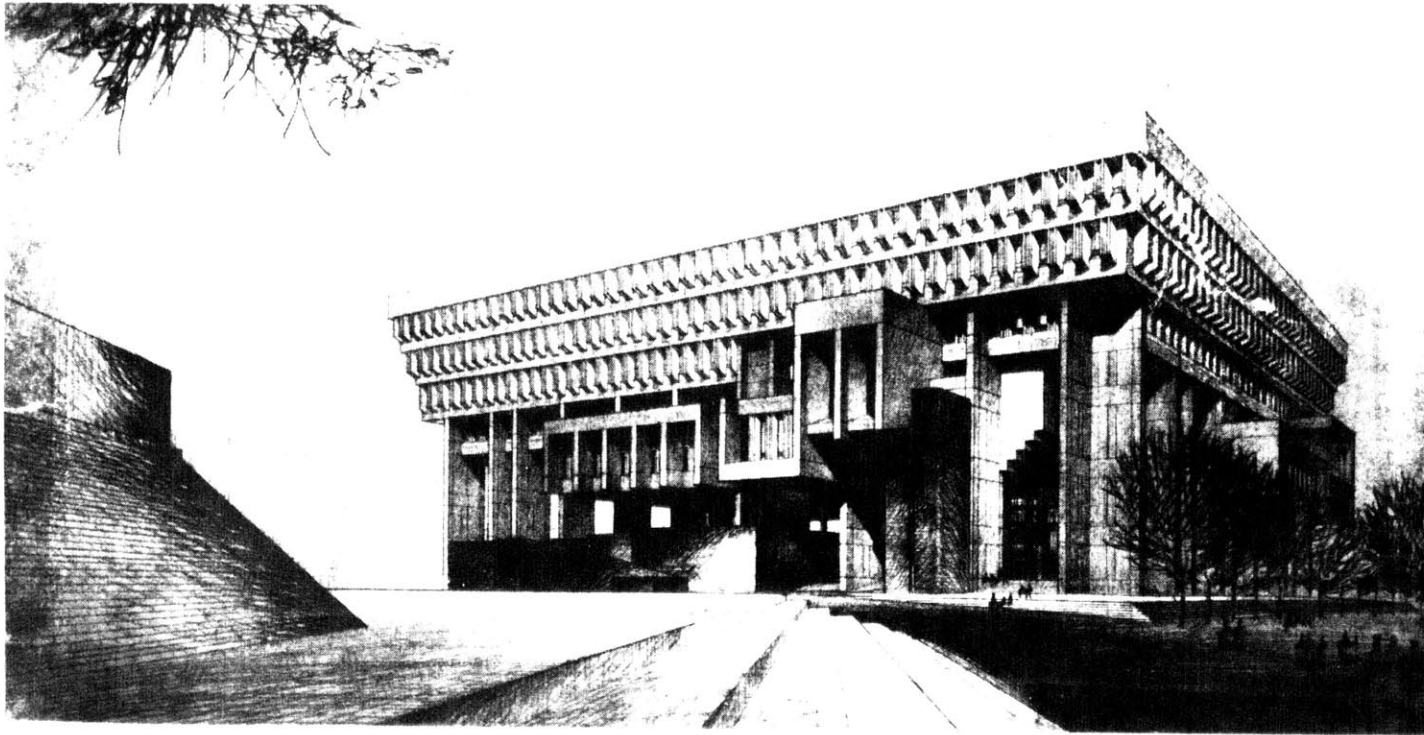
<sup>38</sup> This seems a plausibly accurate method of judging the frequency of use of the plaza for political or other congregational events. It is entirely possible that there were others which occurred which were not recorded by the newspaper, but the Globe, being a local paper would probably not have missed a significant number of these.

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In evaluating the plaza, one has to recall that from the designers' point of view it is not yet complete. The hotel building which formed an important element in Pei's plan, defining its eastern edge along New Congress street near the Blackstone block was never built, and it will never be built in the curved, elongated form in which it was conceived of by Pei (due to various factors referred to in an earlier section of this text). This brings attention to an easily over-looked fact in laying out plans of this scale - the time-frame over which the most crucial elements of the project would possibly be built. The fact that this building was not realized has resulted not only in leaving that edge of the plaza ill-defined and without an appropriate visual terminus, but has made the entire square appear much larger than its already considerable dimensions. It is partially this which gives the whole space its abandoned, uncontained atmosphere.

The comparison of Myer's plan to Pei's serves to highlight many of the crucial issues involved. That they could appear even momentarily similar itself illustrates how difficult the design of public open spaces is, and reveals the subtleties involved in every decision. It shows how the same site, in the same context and responding to the same program can be transformed so drastically by the hands of different designers, *especially when, as in this case, one was supposedly developed from the other*. Statistically, the Pei plan, has a larger area of public open space than the AH&G proposal, but size is not what determines how successfully designed a public space is. On the one hand, is a human-

scaled space intended and designed for frequent, spontaneous use by people; on the other is an extravagant accessory to a monument.



City Hall Plaza, Boston.

Source - Architectural Record, March 1964.



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## Conclusion

People haven't changed as much as cities have, and for that reason public open space remains a vital requirement of urban life.<sup>39</sup>

...the world is full of evidence that it is possible to build monumental urban spaces in which the functional and the formal, the practical and the poetic, are organically united. But to do so involves our relinquishing, once and for all, the Beaux Arts concept of space, in which so much as a fallen leaf upsets some *a priori* dictum of Platonic order.<sup>40</sup>

... a parallel development must occur in current architectural thought, marking a shift of interest from *image* to *space*, and from a definition of the *object* of architecture towards an embracing of its *subject*.<sup>41</sup>

The case study illustrated with the AH&G plan that it is possible to achieve a well-designed public place in a contemporary context which incorporates the necessities of modern urban life, such as wide roads and traffic and skyscrapers, while maintaining relationships with the existing context and without sacrificing human scale and the experience of the pedestrian to them. The city experienced a definite loss from the abandonment of their plan. Yet, it is necessary to reflect that even this

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<sup>39</sup> French, J.S., *Urban Space: A Brief History of the City Square*, 1978, p. 9

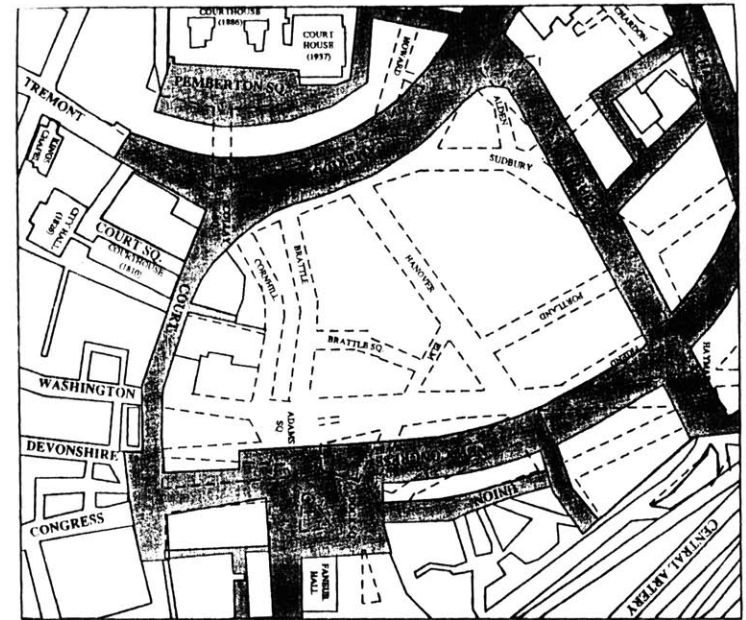
<sup>40</sup> Fitch, James M., "City Hall Boston" in *Architectural Review*, June 1970, Vol. CXLVII, # 880.

<sup>41</sup> Torre, Susanna. "American Square", in *Architecture in the Public Realm*, Vol. 3, 1981.

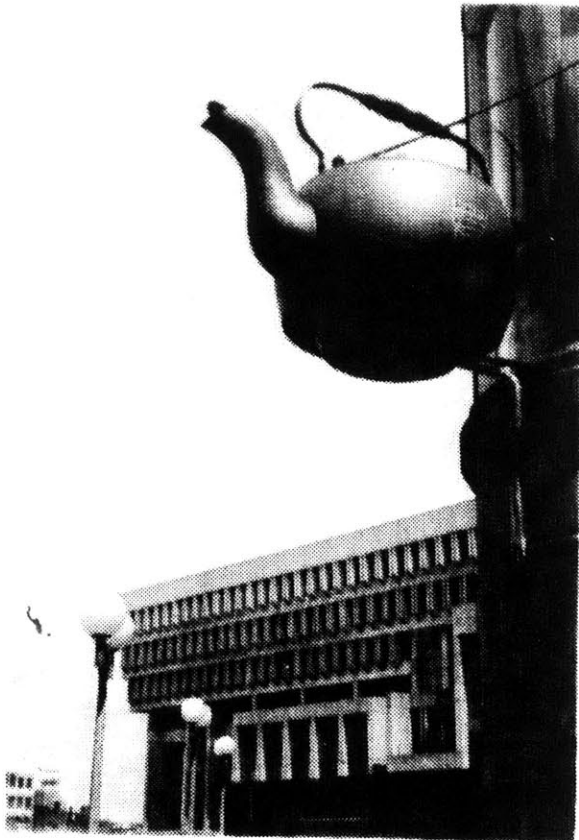
plan has drawbacks which were, in most part, a function of the times in which it was conceived.

The omnipresence of the automobile and the principles of modernist town planning, demanding vast open spaces around and between buildings, found expression to some extent in both Myer's and Pei's plans. Both factors are hard to reconcile with the demands of making well-defined open spaces.

Both solutions represented the loss of memorable places of the city - in the form of the popularity and cultural and historical heritage of Scollay Square, where historic figures like Einstein, Graham Bell, had lived and worked and made discoveries and even Washington had patronized a hotel. The plaza, in both schemes, actually demolished 3 earlier squares - Scollay, Adams and Brattle squares and Cornhill as well. Perhaps it was necessary to revitalize the area, especially in the interests of the entire city, but had the same project been proposed today, there would have been considerable effort to save more of the historic fabric, or at least some of its more prominent buildings, such as the old Howard theatre. The connection of urban space temporally to the city's past, through the preservation of historic buildings and spaces, offers the opportunity not only to create a perceptually richer built environment but one which makes explicit the layers of the city's history, possibly making the space more memorable due to its accumulated meaning for people by storing the physical places where important events in the city history occurred.



The changed street pattern as proposed by Pei.  
Source - Kruh, David. *Always Something Doing, A History of Boston's Infamous Scollay Square*, 1989.



The Steaming Tea Kettle - one of the few pieces of Scollay Square's history which was preserved.

Another approach shared by the planners of both proposals, and widely prevalent in the urban design attitudes of the past several decades, was the subordination, at the initial stages of design, of the interests of the pedestrian to that of the car. Some of the earliest moves in both solutions were largely determined by the organization of traffic in a more efficient manner. Twenty-two streets in the area were reduced to only six in Pei's plan, and to seven in Myer's. Today, there is an increased awareness of the value of providing pedestrianized environments. Yet, still seems to be need to pay greater attention to designing spaces with human scale.

Perhaps the decision to wipe out the old buildings was related directly to the issue of traffic and the desire to accommodate a system of wider roads to facilitate the movement of vehicles; for, the street layout was so integrated in the old fabric, with the buildings which formed its edges that preserving even some of the more famous buildings may have interfered with the proposed circulation pattern.

Public space is still in many ways being shaped by modernist principles such as these. It is being designed without people in mind and hence has become merely an empty symbol of public life.

Simultaneously, it is important to recall that the reasons that there are few appropriately designed spatial settings to adequately support public

life in American cities are much deeper than merely architectural. The current deficiencies of urban public space in America reflect an ideological position which has its roots in modernist attitudes to life - in the philosophy that speed, convenience, consumerism and individualism become the catalysts for isolating human beings from each other.

Solving the problem of urban public space by providing meticulously designed settings for public life will not automatically lead to a renewed interest in the public realm on the part of the people. It can, however, go some way to undo the damage to the urban environment which the popular urban design theories of the last several decades have caused. And perhaps, by inviting people back into the city, it can provide an environment conducive to the growth of a healthy public life.

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