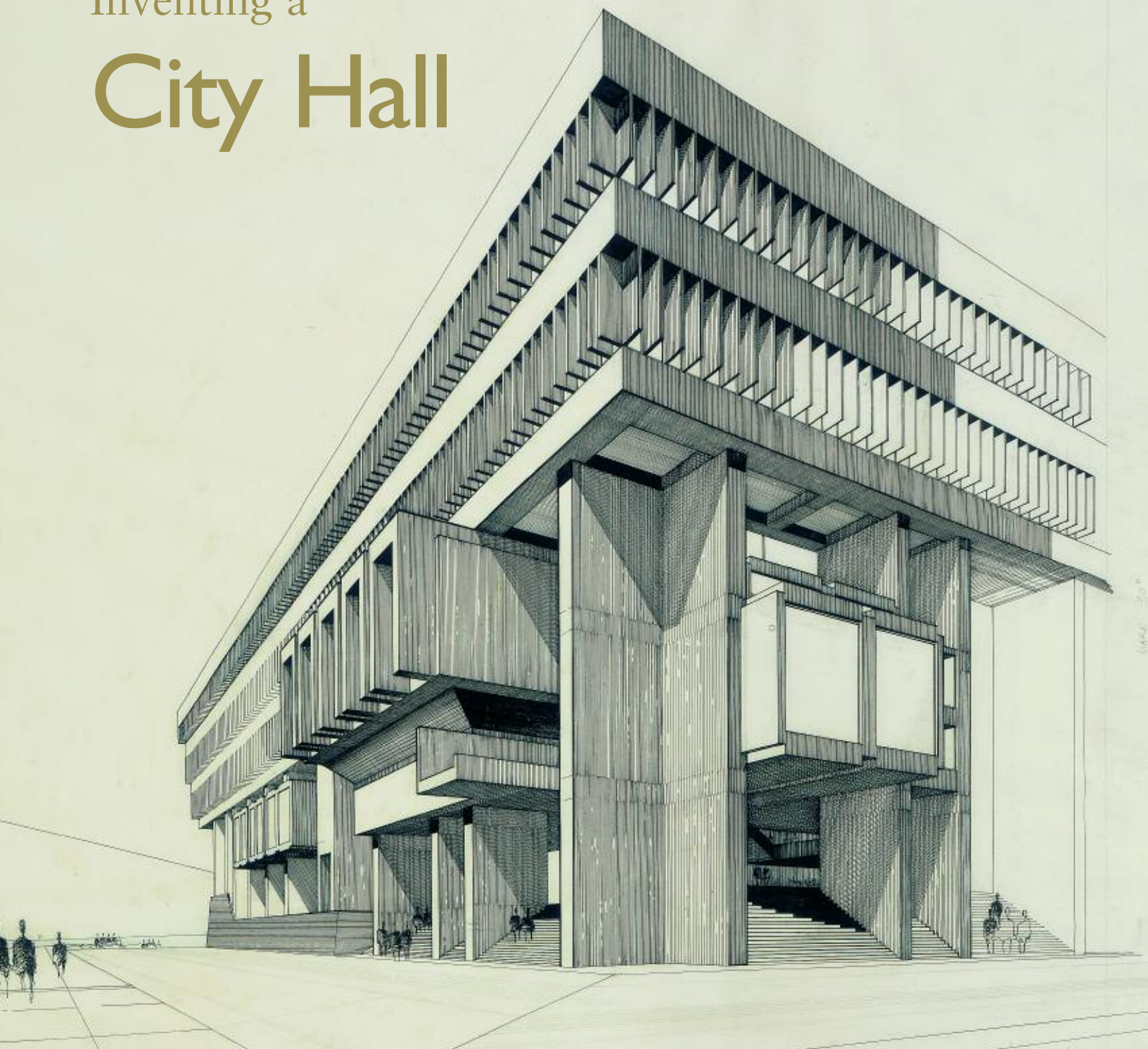
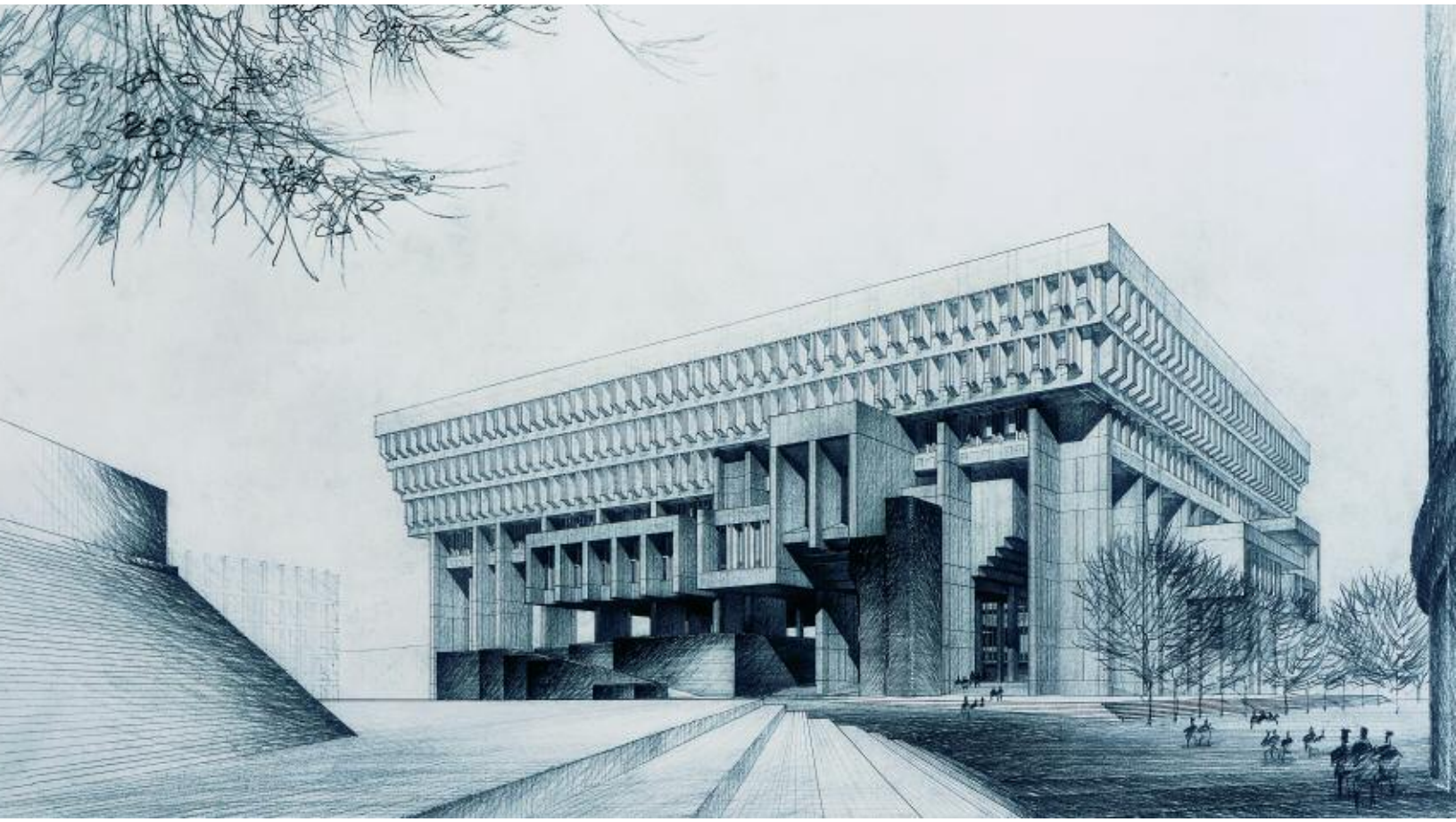
SPOTLIGHT

Inventing a City Hall



Drawings of Boston's City Hall, selected from the recent gift by Gerhard Kallmann and Michael McKinnell of their firm's architectural records, are remarkable documents revealing the genesis of this innovative building.

ABOVE **Perspective drawing from the competition's first stage reveals the bold structure proposed, and the concept for the City Council Chamber to project beyond the forms of the administrative offices above. The brick base—representing the original sloping hillside of the site—holds the most heavily visited spaces.** McKinnell. 35 ¼" x 35 ¼"

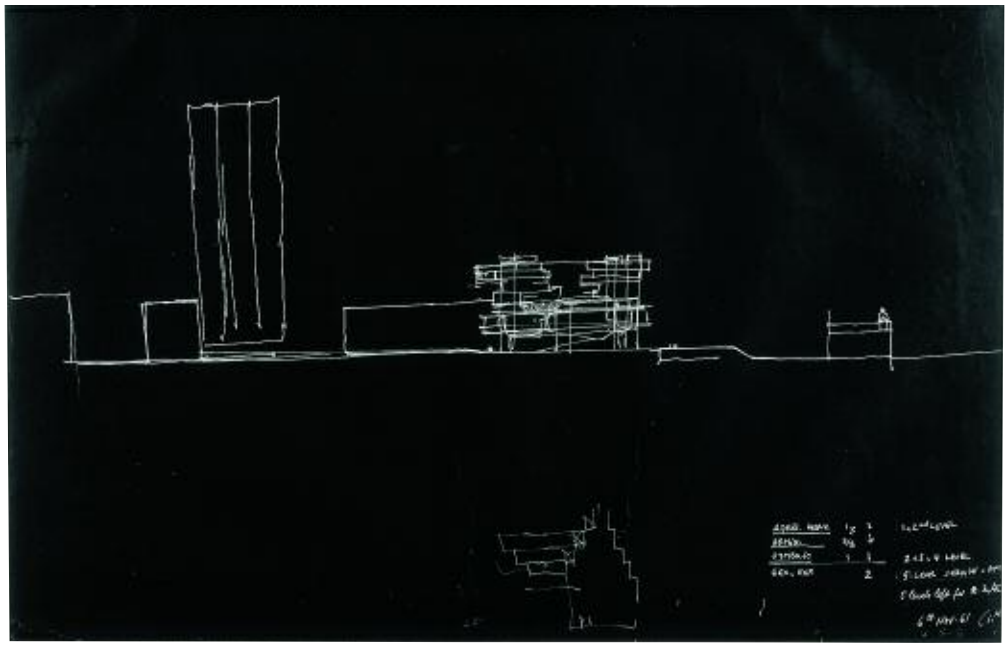


ABOVE **Perspective drawing from the design development phase illustrates the design's evolution, with concrete frames now bracketing the Council Offices to the left of the Council Chamber, and paired pre-cast brackets now separating the upper level windows.**

McKinnell and Gary Larsen. 30" x 45 ¼"

In 1961, Boston embarked on a mission to create a modern city hall at the heart of the 330-year-old city. In place of the customary architect-selection process, Mayor John F. Collins announced a nationwide design competition, the first for an American city hall since that of San Francisco in 1906. The idea found inspiration in several recent competitions that were drawing international attention: the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, Sydney's Opera House, and the Toronto City Hall. A Boston City Hall competition and its resulting building would serve, planners hoped, as a catalyst for the city's rebirth.

The sketches and drawings published here reveal the evolution of the dramatic design, demonstrated in two stages of competition materials and in design development studies. The design responded to the competition's exacting requirements: the building's location was fixed within a given footprint, and the height was limited so as not to overshadow its historic neighbor below, Faneuil Hall. The proposal had to accommodate a detailed architectural



RIGHT **Reverse-reading photostat of Kallmann and McKinnell's original "First Sketch" for the new city hall reveals in cross section their concept for a building with "trays" of enclosed space arranged around a courtyard, above a plaza running from Cambridge Street and the JFK federal tower through the building and down to Faneuil Hall.** 16¼" x 23¾"

program: 346,410 square feet of specific functions including, for instance, spaces of "Symbolic Importance," such as the City Council Chamber, Council Offices, and the Mayor's Office (with eleven offices ranging in size from 108 to 270 square feet). In the "Heavy Public Traffic" category, designers were to provide thirty-six linear feet of public counter, with six cashier stations for the Collections Division.

Two hundred and fifty-six teams of architects from around the country entered the landmark competition. From this enormous field, a distinguished jury culled eight finalists, each of whom was awarded $5,000 and given three months to develop the designs. Among the eight anonymous groups was a young team led by Gerhard M. Kallmann and Noel M. (Michael) McKinnell, along with their colleague Edward F. Knowles.

Kallmann and McKinnell's drawings for the preliminary stage present a new concept for a municipal government building. It departs not only from the symmetrical layouts and traditional symbolism of historic governmental structures, but also from the pure forms and sleek surfaces that characterized the era's contemporary architecture. Instead, this design envisions a courtyard structure that expands at its top and that brings the ceremonial and administrative spaces to the exterior façade and beyond, where they can be seen and from which their occupants can view the city around them.

The cross sections illustrate these functions floating above the plaza level, where the "Heavy Public Traffic" spaces are located for easy access. In fact, the plans and sections demonstrate the architects' fundamentally democratic idea of extending the enormous public plaza (a requirement of the competition) right through the proposed building, to create lively interactions and also to reveal open views and a topographic connection between Cambridge and Tremont streets above and Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market below.

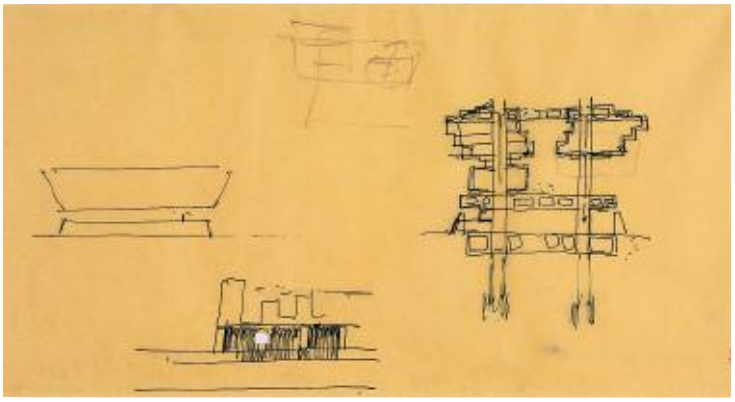
These brilliant examples of the now-vanishing art of architectural drawing convincingly adumbrate this structure before our eyes, as they did for the jurors.

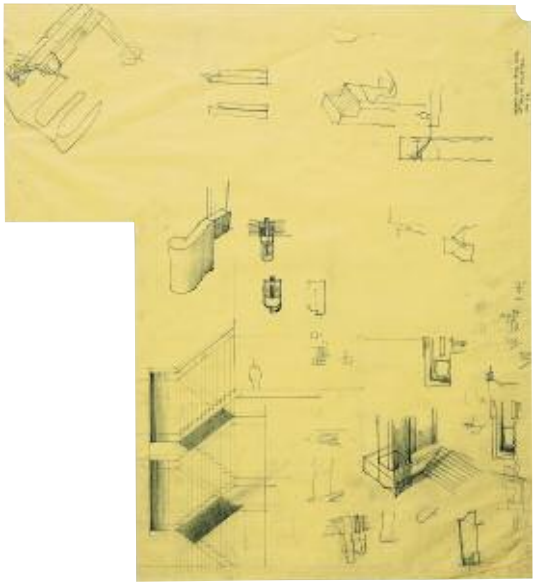
ABOVE **Michael McKinnell and Gerhard Kallmann. 1964.**

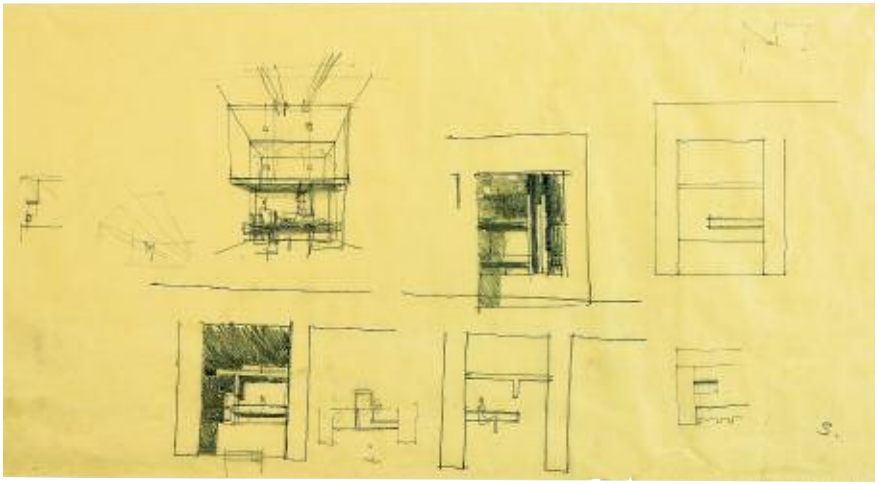
RIGHT **Page of early concept sketches includes an alternative sectional idea, in which the irregular forms housing the proposed city hall's occupied spaces are supported by mast-like structures that provide circulation.** McKinnell. 21"x 18"

BELOW LEFT **Studies—among several on the same sheet—carefully reveal the form of the Mayor's stair in the main lobby.** McKinnell. 28 ½" x 30"

BELOW RIGHT **Tracing paper sketches explore the scale and configuration of elements that break up the large windows of the original municipal library bays (now City Council Offices).** McKinnell. 18" x 42"



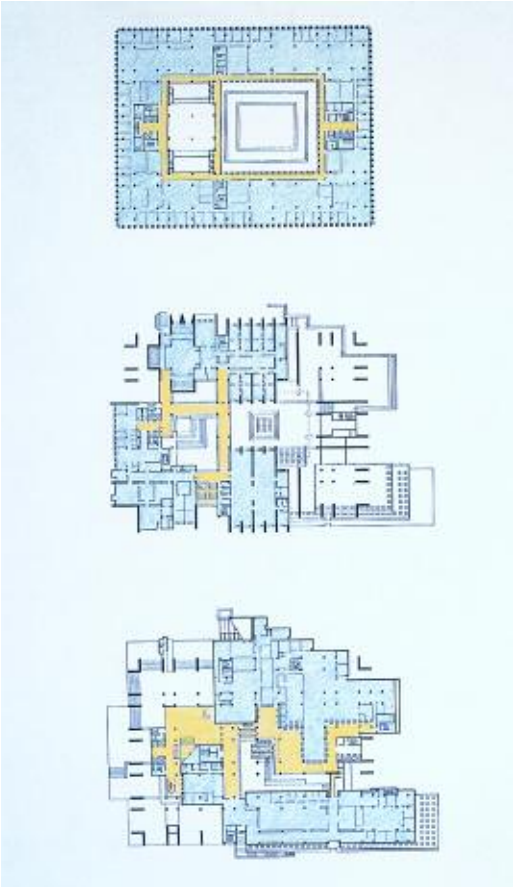




Kallmann's informative section perspectives provide a sense of realism for the building structure and its systems, while McKinnell's elevation studies and exterior perspectives clearly articulate its external form.

For the May 1962 final competition round, the jury included four prominent architects along with three business leaders, from New England Mutual Life, Filene's, and Stop and Shop. Looking back today, one agrees with the jurors' decision: most of the submittals that they rejected were simplified, unarticulated abstract forms that might just as easily have been designs for suburban corporate office buildings. By contrast, the winning design, which received the jurors'

BOTTOM **First-stage competition site plan depicts the new city hall among both existing and proposed buildings from I.M. Pei and Partners' master plan. (The long, thin structures behind City Hall and adjacent to Faneuil Hall were not built.)** Detail, 22" x 24"

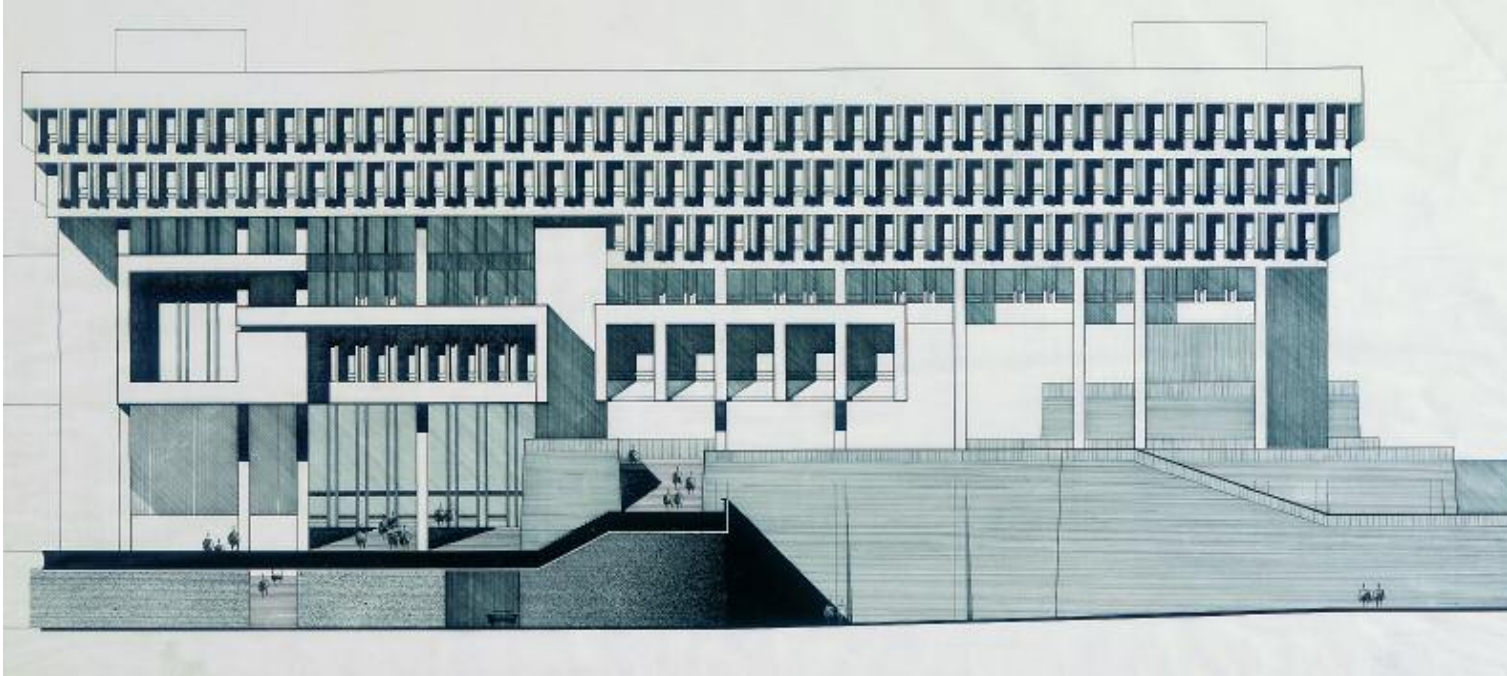


unanimous support, inventively responded to both its civic program and its urban site.

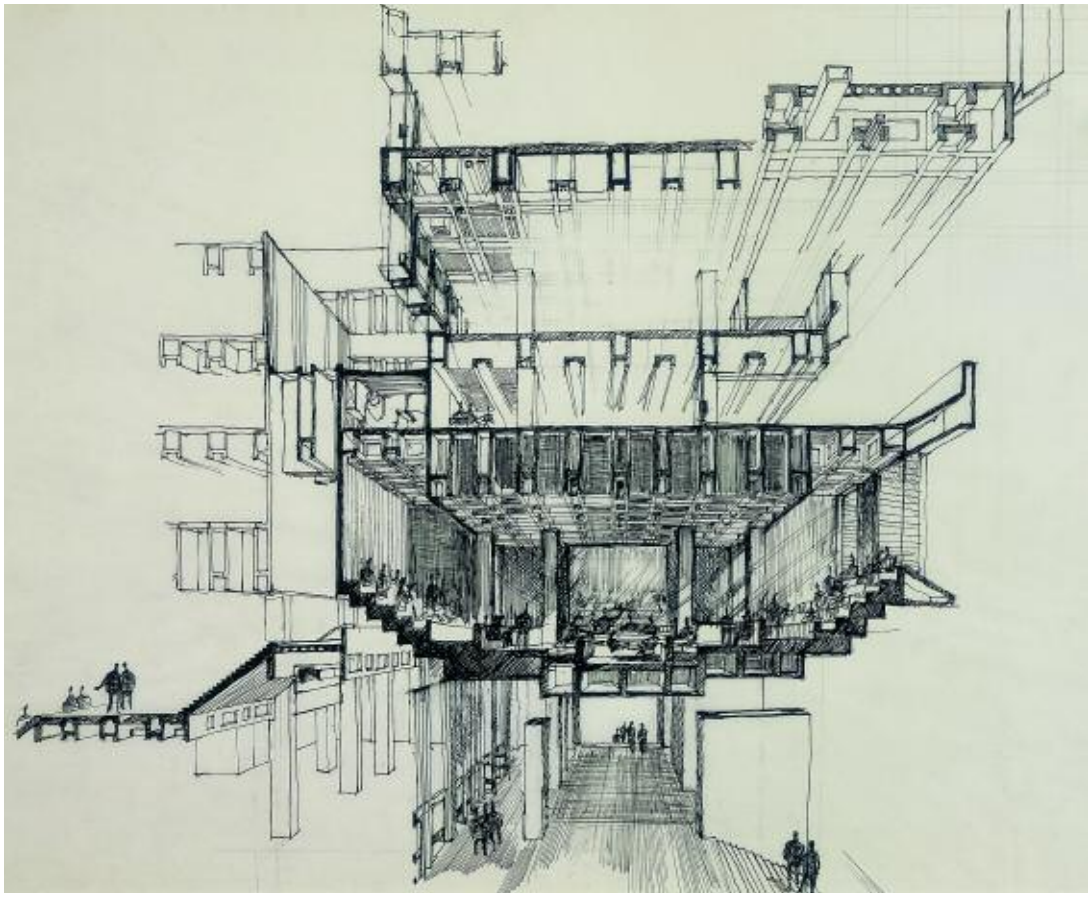
It was quickly proclaimed to be "as fine a building for its time and place as Boston has ever produced" by Boston historian Walter Muir Whitehill. *Horizon Magazine* not only praised the winning entry, but lauded the competition process itself: "Boston's jury…has turned in a decisive verdict that will stand for some time as a model of responsible civic conduct."

In 1969, City Hall opened to acclaim as a building and as a civic achievement. It immediately became the symbol of "the New Boston," a Boston that successfully

LEFT **Three key floor plans depict the proposed building's volumetric concept. The upper administrative floor forms an open rectangle, defining the building's outline; the ceremonial spaces of the middle level are pushed to the edges of the building, around the south hall; and the main entrance level shows the open floor plan and the connections to the plaza.** 20½" x 18¼"

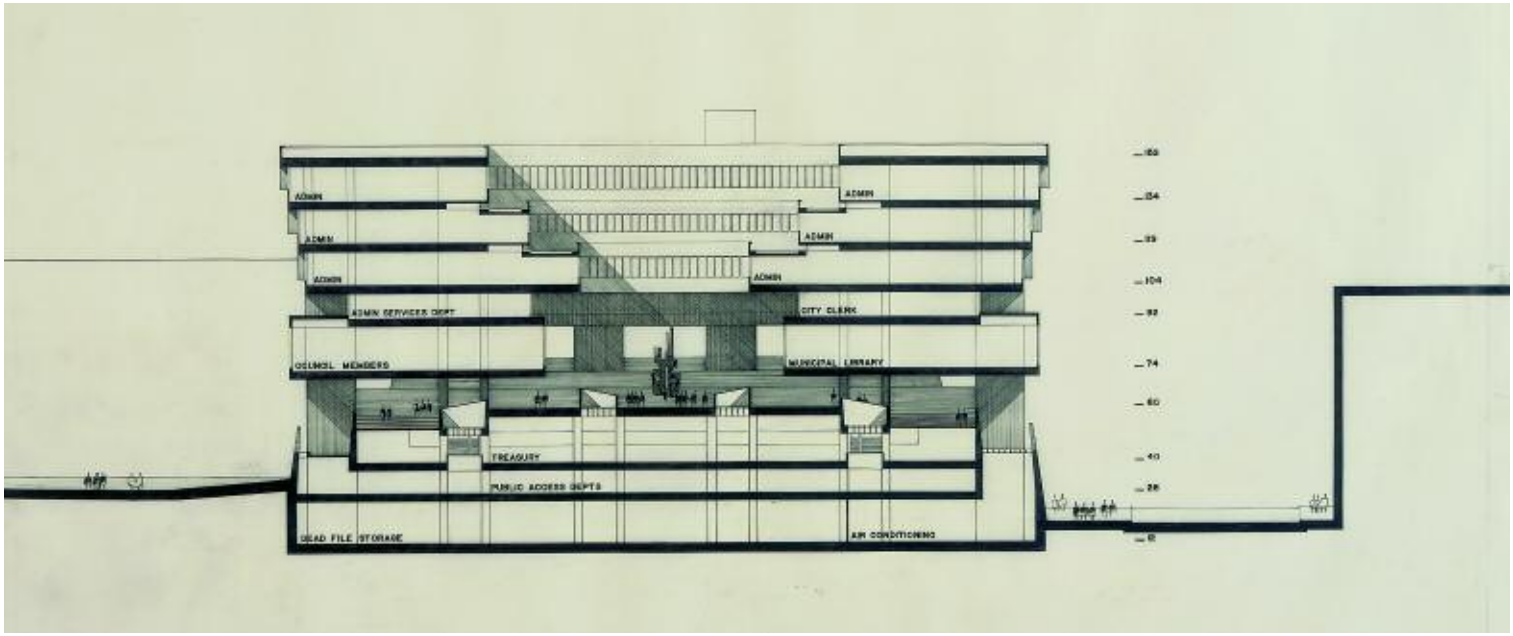


ABOVE **Final-stage presentation drawing of the east elevation, showing how light and shadow articulate the special civic spaces more boldly than the administrative spaces above. The dark horizontal band represents the platform that was to span Congress Street (not built), which the competition required. This broad platform provided a major entrance into City Hall from the east, in addition to the entrances from the other three directions.** McKinnell. 27¼" x 52¼"

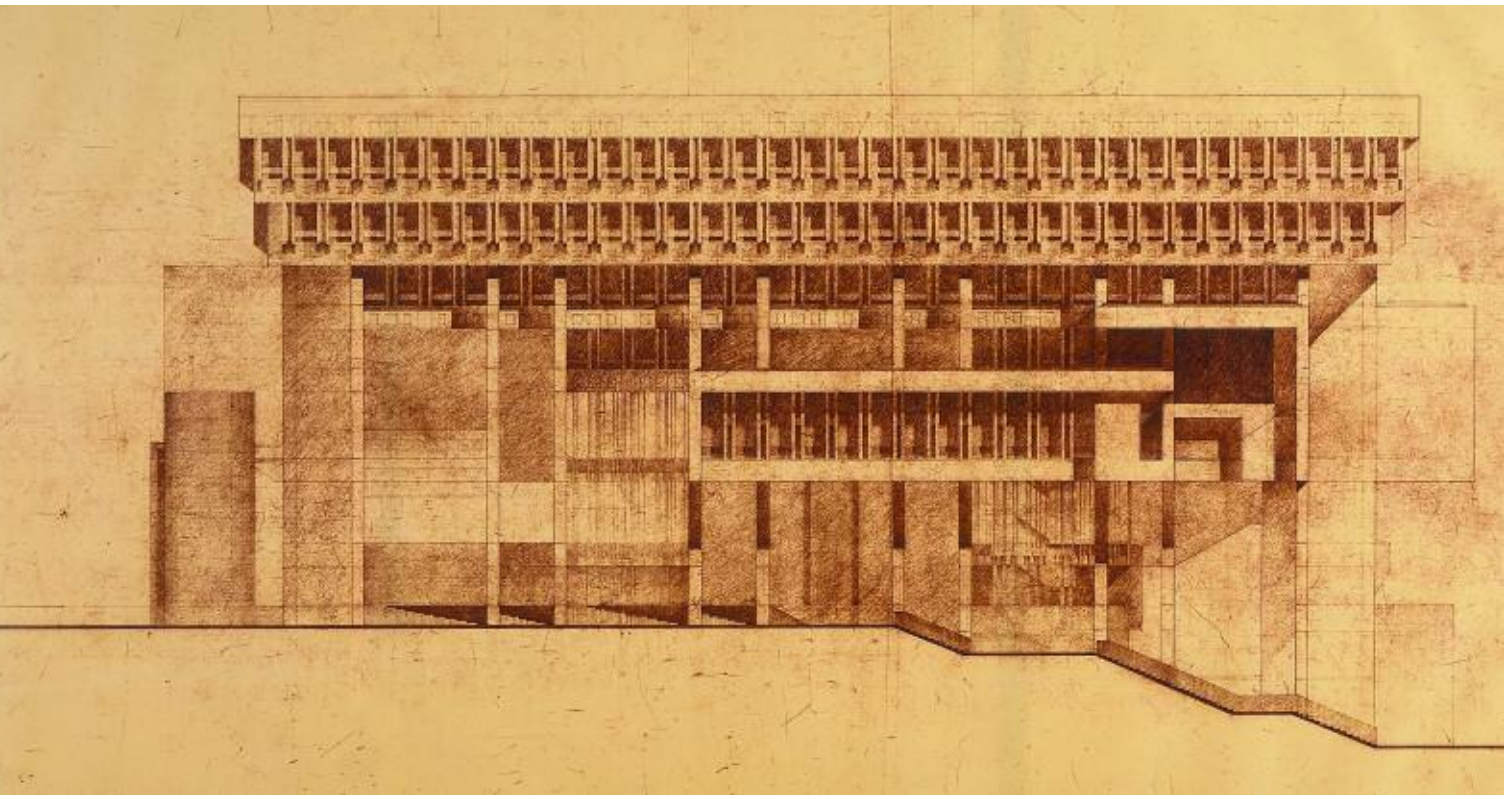


LEFT **Kallmann's complex sectional perspective study develops the interior volume of the Council Chamber at the same time that it suggests the pre-cast structure housing the building systems and also proposes the chamber as a stepped, amphitheater-like form seen from the level below.** 24 ¼" x 36 ¼"

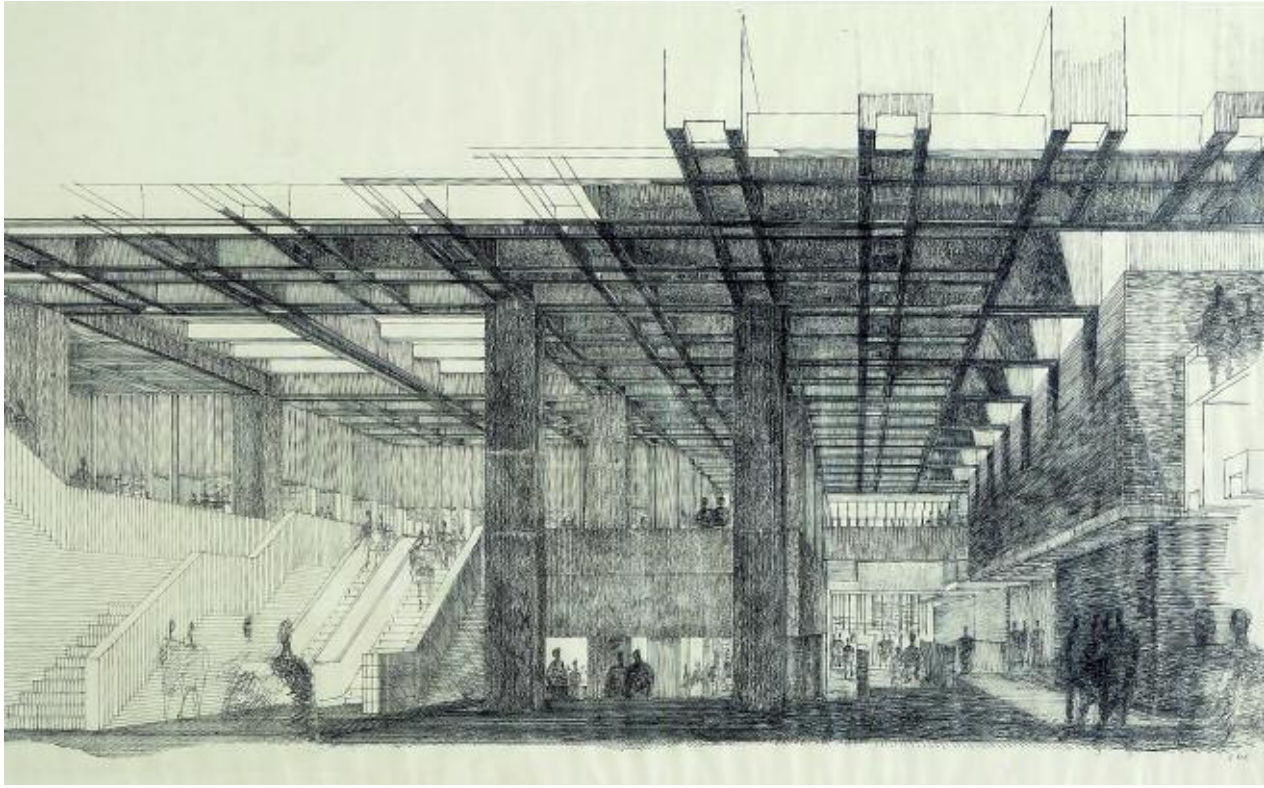
BELOW **McKinnell's presentation cross section from the first stage of the competition looks north through the proposed building's courtyard, with its large sculpture, and identifies the program spaces arranged around and below it.** 28 ½" x 36"



BELOW **Design development south elevation depicts the prominent forms of the Mayor's Office suite, looking toward Washington Street and the Old State House, and the stair cascading down to Congress Street and Faneuil Hall.** McKinnell. 29" x 53 ½"



RIGHT **Kallmann's interior section perspective shows the proposed grand public spaces of the building's north entry hall and the structural system of its coffered, skylit ceiling. The monumental size of this image typifies the presentation drawings illustrated here, notable for hand-drawn pen and ink renderings.** 24" x 45 ⅛"



© 1976 Steve Rosenthal

ABOVE **Shortly after City Hall's completion, Faneuil Hall marketplace—which previously had been considered for possible demolition—was dramatically and successfully transformed for new uses. The new City Hall design and its deliberate alignment with the orientation of both Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market, contribute to this memorable urban ensemble, which spans more than two centuries, from Georgian brick to Greek Revival granite to modern-day brick and concrete.**

reinvented itself after decades of decline. Already in 1991, the Massachusetts Historical Commission determined that the building was eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The new firm of Kallmann, McKinnell and Wood went on to become one of Boston's, and the nation's, preeminent architectural practices. It won Boston's Harleston Parker Award more times than any other architect since the award was created in 1923, and designed notable structures around the world, from the University of Massachusetts/Boston Campus Center and the Newton, Massachusetts, Public Library to Becton Dickinson's corporate headquarters in New Jersey and the U.S Embassy in Bangkok.

Paradoxically, these fragile original drawings reveal the genesis of the powerful structure that we know today. It is one that critic Walter McQuaid identified as belonging to a long-standing tradition of architecture in Boston, that of "emphatic, forceful" masonry buildings dating back to Solomon Willard's Bunker Hill Monument, Alexander Parris' Quincy Market, Gridley Bryant's rugged commercial palaces, and H.H. Richardson's robust granite edifices. Preserved in Historic New England's Library and Archives, this collection records Kallmann and McKinnell's developing vision, and documents a time when a design competition and a new building for government placed Boston on the international stage.

—*Gary Wolf, AIA*

Gary Wolf, principal of Gary Wolf Architects in Boston, organized and wrote the text for the exhibition of Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles' City Hall drawings at Boston's Wentworth Institute of Technology in 2008.