

Architecture

Working with City Hall

Gallery displays ideas for redesigning the controversial downtown site

By Robert Campbell
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Mayor Menino hates Boston City Hall. So do a lot of other people.

Now six young, bright architecture firms are suggesting ways to redesign it.

Why redesign City Hall? It was much admired when it opened, back in 1968. In a 1976 national poll of architects and scholars, it was ranked the seventh greatest building in American history.

But tastes change. City Hall is now probably the least loved building in Massachusetts, possibly the least loved in our entire galaxy. "Hulking concrete fortress" would be a typical description today.

The mayor wants to abandon City Hall and build a shiny new one, perhaps on the South Boston waterfront, perhaps in Dudley Square.

Should we let him? Can we stop him? For months now, those have been the two hottest questions on the local architectural scene.

One way to think about them is to climb down from the sidewalk into a new subterranean gallery, located at 81b Wareham St., near the corner of Albany in the South End. This is where the six redesigns will be on view through Oct. 19.

In the faddish tradition of the poet e. e. cummings, or perhaps k.d. lang, it doesn't have capital letters in its name. This is the pinkcomma gallery, and yes, there's a big pink comma punctuating the street entrance.

The pinkcomma is run by a group of young architects and designers who call themselves "over,under." (Maybe the shift key is broken?) Just opened, it's the only art gallery for architecture in Greater Boston. For the first show, it's displaying, in models and drawings, six ideas for ways to redesign City Hall so as to solve some of its problems.

I'm not going to rate the de-



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signs. This isn't a competition. And none of the work amounts to more than quick, shallow first thoughts. What's interesting, though, is that these bright young architects believe in City Hall. They think it has lots of problems, but that it is, nevertheless, a

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magnificent piece of architecture. (So do I.) The question is how to save what's magnificent while fixing what's grim.

Softening the façade with new glass terraces? Bang new holes to flood the interior with daylight? Get rid of the monumental stairway that crowds the

lobby and goes more or less nowhere?

Maybe shrink the city offices into just the upper floors, freeing the lower ones for public uses like shops and restaurants? (With today's communication systems, not all city workers need to be near one another in one big pile. They could be scattered in many locations around the city and thus become more accessible to the pub-

lic.)

Or shrink the tundra-like expanse of City Hall Plaza, giving it a more human scale, and ring it, too, with active uses?

The six young design teams were chosen by the Boston Society of Architects. Their designs, besides being hung at pinkcomma, are also published in the current issue of the society's magazine, *ArchitectureBoston*. I hate to praise a rival publication on architecture, but this issue of *ArchitectureBoston*, edited by Liz Padjen, is magnificent, a treasure trove of thoughts and ideas not only about City Hall but about the whole question of what we as a culture should preserve and how we should preserve it. The magazine has a circulation of 25,000. It goes free to architects in New England and New York City, and can be accessed at ArchitectureBoston.com or purchased at Borders.

One of the six young architecture firms is over,under itself. It bills itself as "a Boston-based multidisciplinary studio for design, interiors, urban design, graphic identity, and publications." Among other things, it was selling T-shirts on a recent visit. The others are: Howeler + Yoon, known for its inventive experiments with new ma-

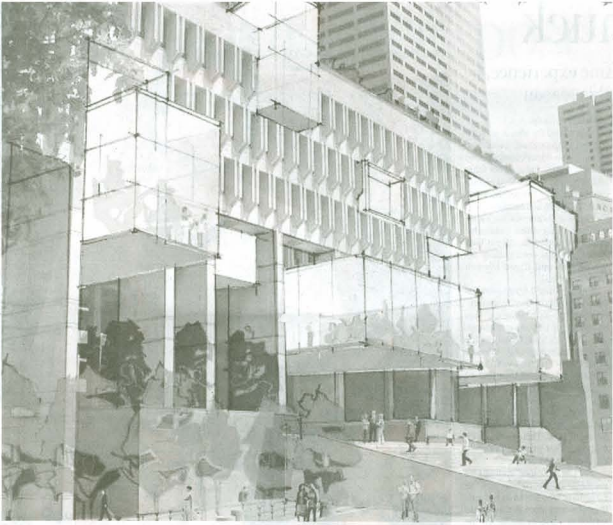
terials; kuo.chaouni with uenal karamuk (yeah, lowercase again, yawn); Moskow Architects, who are the old-timers in this group; Single Speed design, the firm that built a house in Lexington out of waste junk left over from the Big Dig; and Studio Luz, which designed the marvelous Diva Lounge in Davis Square and other restaurants. As you can tell from the names, young architecture in Boston is a multicultural world.

There are all kinds of problems with City Hall. But it took a lot of energy to build it, and that energy is "embedded," in preservationist lingo, in the present building. It would take more energy to demolish it. In a planet of shrinking resources, we should hoard what we have.

Also "embedded," you might say, in City Hall is the civic pride felt by people of its era in the spectacular rebirth of Boston in the 1960s, after many decades of decline.

For both reasons, throwaway architecture is not the answer. City Hall needs reinvention, not trashing.

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Six possibilities for redesigning the existing City Hall (below) rather than building a new one, including a design by Moskow Architects (above), are on view at pinkcomma gallery in the South End.