

Our City Hall

▼ Photo by George Cserna, courtesy of Kallmann McKinnell & Wood Architects.

One morning in May, I stood at the edge of Boston Common in front of St. Gaudens' memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and his Negro regiment. I was on my way to City Hall, to have a look at the building for this magazine, but I wasn't in any hurry about it.

A man came up beside me, clutching a folded-up tourist map. He puzzled over the bronze relief awhile, then turned to a young man nearby and asked, in a British accent, "This has to do with your Civil War, then, not your War of Revolution?"

The young man was there to hustle trolley tours of the city. He wore a Red Sox cap and a wiseguy smirk. He moved in closer but didn't answer.

The Englishman gestured at the State House. "And this is where they signed your Declaration of Independence?"

The trolley-tour kid gave me the eye, as if he was about to steal something. "No, that was the *old* State House."

I wandered off, over Beacon Hill and up Cambridge Street. On the corner of Staniford Street, bundles of red bricks were stacked shoulder high. On each bundle was a sign: "The Original Boston City Hall Pavers / Manufactured By The Stiles & Hart Brick Co."

City Hall Plaza was as barren as ever, even on a sunny day. A few people hurried over it. They put their heads down and set off across the red bricks and didn't stop till they'd reached the other side.

But City Hall, from across the Plaza, has a different vibe. It makes you stop and look. It invites you to explore, first with your eyes, to root around in the crazy broken geometries of its façade. How do these rectangles fit together? What room is that? How does this strange building work?

Inside, the puzzle continues. Like an Escher drawing, City Hall is full of gloomy labyrinthine hallways and half-hidden staircases, bridges, ramps, nooks, dead ends. It is a shame that the entrances to the



maze are mostly blocked. At street level, pedestrians see only flat brick walls or forests of cast-concrete columns. I walked down Congress Street along the back of City Hall, past tourism signs advertising "Boston: America's Walkable City"; it was like walking beside a walled fortress. Most of us experience City Hall only from the outside, as if it were a solid sculpture. It is a building more walked by than entered.

City Hall is iconic (it is featured on the uniform patch of Boston cops) but it is not pretty. It is not designed in the decorous language of our other "government centers," like the State House or the old City Hall: warm materials, traditional forms. That is the architectural language of how our government sees itself. City Hall is how we see our government: confusing, labyrinthine, chaotic, shadowy, intimidating. I suspect that is why Mayor Menino wants to be rid of it.

The poet Robert Lowell wrote that the Shaw memorial "sticks like a fishbone / in the city's throat." City Hall sticks in the city's throat, too. Boston politics — "City Hall" in the abstract — has always been a little "brutalist." The building sits atop a bulldozed neighborhood. And on those "Original Boston City Hall Pavers," Ted Landsmark was gored with a flagpole, our own Iwo Jima image. True Boston: complex, inaccessible, chilly, even fierce. Is it possible to love such a place, and such a building? To find them beautiful *because* they are difficult? I do. But then, I'm from Boston.

Welcome to town, pal. Looking for the place where the Declaration of Independence was signed? Try City Hall. ■

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