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“Graphic Essay: Imagine That!”

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# The Sins of City Hall

**Too Opaque** Entries (even the ones that aren't locked) are hard to find. The Congress Street façade is fortress-like. The interior life of the building is screened from passers-by.

**Too Big** Monumental interior spaces lack activity and purpose. The size of the Plaza is suited only for the occasional festival, demonstration, or sports celebration.

**Too Mute** The building is confusing because wayfinding is not intuitive and signage is lacking or ineffective. Possible opportunities to heighten communication between government and citizens have been missed or ignored.

**Too Ugly** Concrete is a tough material, made more grim by years of grime, and the heavy massing of the building can make it seem foreboding and intimidating. The monumental scale is not balanced by human-scale materials, details, or amenities.

**Too Dark** Entries are underlit and unwelcoming. Spaces most often used by the public, such as the parking office concourse and gallery, have little daylight and inadequate artificial light due to broken fixtures or burned-out bulbs. Work spaces on lower levels lack daylight.

**Too Empty** Spaces such as the courtyard terraces and atrium that are seemingly intended for public activity are locked off or underprogrammed. There is little reason to visit the building other than official business.

**Too Costly** HVAC systems are inefficient and expensive to run. Problems of obsolete or aging systems and materials are aggravated by deferred maintenance and lack of maintenance budget.

**Too Aloof** Connections to city pedestrian networks are lacking or, at least, daunting because of steep stairs and the isolation of the plaza. Security checkpoints are unwelcoming and badly integrated. Lack of accessibility, especially for wheelchair users, creates barriers for some citizens and workers.

Photo this page: Alex Budnitz.

Photos opposite page (from top to bottom): Peter Vanderwarker; Ezra Stoller © Esto; © Cervin Robinson; Ezra Stoller © Esto.

Six young design teams show that the sins of City Hall need not be mortal.

# Imagine That!

The sins of City Hall are widely known. What is less widely known — or less widely accepted — is that many of those sins can be fixed.

The real problem is that the supposed unfixability of City Hall has become its own urban legend. Most people haven't seen the proposals that have been submitted over the years and can't imagine anything but the grim experience that defines the building today. But what if City Hall could be made new again?

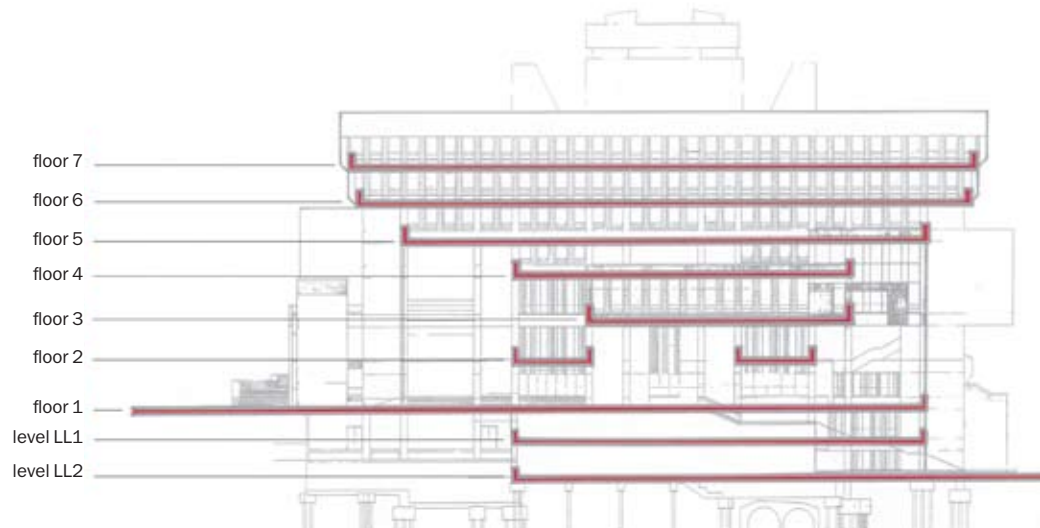
*ArchitectureBoston* asked six teams of young designers to consider the building's sins and to imagine ways in which City Hall could be modified, both to correct its failures and to address the changes in its social, political, and physical context. Their proposals follow, and include ideas ranging from changes in functions to changes in the building and the way it connects to the surrounding city. Together, they all serve two purposes: they offer fresh visions of what City Hall might be, and they help to identify the essential elements of the building — the powerful presence that has drawn legions of supporters to its defense.

The team members reflect the new face of Boston. They are young: All but two were born after City Hall opened; and all but one of their firms were founded in the new millennium. They represent the new globalism: Those born in other countries include all of the principals in two firms; half the principals in three firms; and three out of four principals in one firm. Only one firm is led entirely by principals who were born in the US. Only one participant is originally from Boston. (Interestingly, three designers were born in Colombia, but practice in different firms, and three were born in Seoul, but practice in different firms.) In this respect, they resemble the building's original design team, which shared similar attributes of relative youth and international roots.

On a personal note, I would like to thank all the participants for the spirit of generosity and collaboration that infused this project from its beginning, as the teams shared resources and information while working under nearly impossible time constraints. It is clear that the energy, creativity, and intellect that they brought to this effort will continue to benefit the city in the years to come.

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# Moskow Architects

Many of the long-standing complaints associated with City Hall stem from its stand-offish relationship with the public. With that in mind, we concentrated our creative efforts on creating the perception of a kinder, gentler building.

One easy way to make the building more user-friendly is to pick a first floor! The City Hall Plaza level will be designated as the first floor. The floors above will be relabeled 2 through 7 and the floors below will be relabeled Lower Level 1 (LL1) and Lower Level 2 (LL2).

The second idea is to improve the existing entry hall and orient it outward toward the Plaza and the public. The space will be simplified by relocating security to elevator cores and removing the monumental interior stair. This, in conjunction with new up-lighting and a new color palette for the walls, will create a much more vibrant, useable space. Its focus will be a new information center for both the building and events throughout the city. There will also be space allotted to vendors, kiosks, tables, and chairs. A roof-mounted hydroponic greenhouse will grow produce for atrium vendors.

Finally, the exterior needs to be updated to reinforce this new openness. To lighten the building's fortress-like presence, a series of oversized "vitrines" will be hung off the façade. These will introduce light to interior spaces while presenting an animated face to the plaza. In addition, they will reinterpret the building's existing ordering principles and volumes without an extensive reconstruction. One smaller move geared toward encouraging more activity will be the installation of ceremonial bleacher stairs leading to the second-level exterior court.

