

Boston City Hall Plaza:
Reinstate the Street Matrix Leading to City Hall Plaza
Tsomides Letter: ArchitectureBoston Magazine

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Attached: Historic Map of Scollay Square.

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Your roundtable discussion on City Hall and its plaza ("The Way We Were," May-June 2005) was much needed, but it did not address the street pattern or the neighborhood that City Hall displaced.

We believe that we should initially focus on the street pattern that was displaced by the New City Hall & Plaza as much as the building. Crucial elements of what used to be there are being ignored; It was Scollay Square, a hustling bustling center of activity that attracted people from all over New England.

I remember being one of thousands of teenagers who would skip school to visit old Scollay Square; "peeking" in at the Old Howard Casino Theater to catch a glimpse of a burlesque or comedy act. The streets, Brattle and Cornhill, flanking on either side of what is now City Hall and its Plaza, and Hanover Street at the other end of the Plaza against the JFK Building, led up to Cambridge Street and Scollay Square. They were all eliminated by the new Government Center. They were simply steeply sloped streets leading up from Congress to Cambridge Street, lined with buildings, somewhat dingy in memory perhaps but appropriately scaled and detailed, comfortably fitting into the streetscape and providing a gradual human scaled transition of grade and buildings from Cambridge to Congress Streets to what is now an isolated City Hall Plaza. The New City Hall, unfortunately, was ominously elevated along its backside above Congress Street facing Adams Square, Faneuil Hall and the Quincy Market below. Now we have a very foreboding uninviting multitude of steps, which have replaced the sloping busy streets.

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Had this street fabric not been displaced, one can only imagine how wonderful and exciting it could be if that same or similar matrix of streets existed today and fed into City Hall Plaza. One could leisurely meander from Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market up to City Hall Plaza, led all the way along by a variety of shops, restaurants and cafes, only to pleasantly stumble upon an open airy City Hall Plaza, filled with people and activity facing the grand monumentality of New City Hall.

Maybe the "unstructured vitality of the city streets" as recently referenced by Messrs. Kallmann and McKinnell, the buildings architects, (ArchitectureBoston Magazine), can be reintroduced to engage and enhance City Hall Plaza.

If that were to happen, the complete revitalization and redesign of the City Hall building could then proceed with new energy and purpose, reinventing and adapting itself for the next millennium.

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Encl: A map of Old Scollay Square and Government Center before it became what it is today is attached (credit: www.wardmaps.com).

The map has what is now Cambridge Street labeled as "Court Street." The current Court Street is at the bottom of the map beginning at Scollay Square and leading to the right. Adams Square is in front of Faneuil Hall. New City Hall would sit between the old Brattle and Cornhill Streets facing Adams Square.

PS: The Sunday (May 22, 2005) NY Times Travel Section cover page features a dramatic photo of a very steep street in Urbino, Italy, not dissimilar to the former sloping streets (Brattle and Cornhill) leading to old Scollay Center, albeit not as steep, which were replaced with high walls and stairs. The sloping streets of Urbino, Siena and other Italian hill towns continue to provide a rich urban experience with their winding sloping streets leading into an open square.

