The Public Building: From soaring statements to shoddy mediocrity Design
By Ada Louise Huxtable
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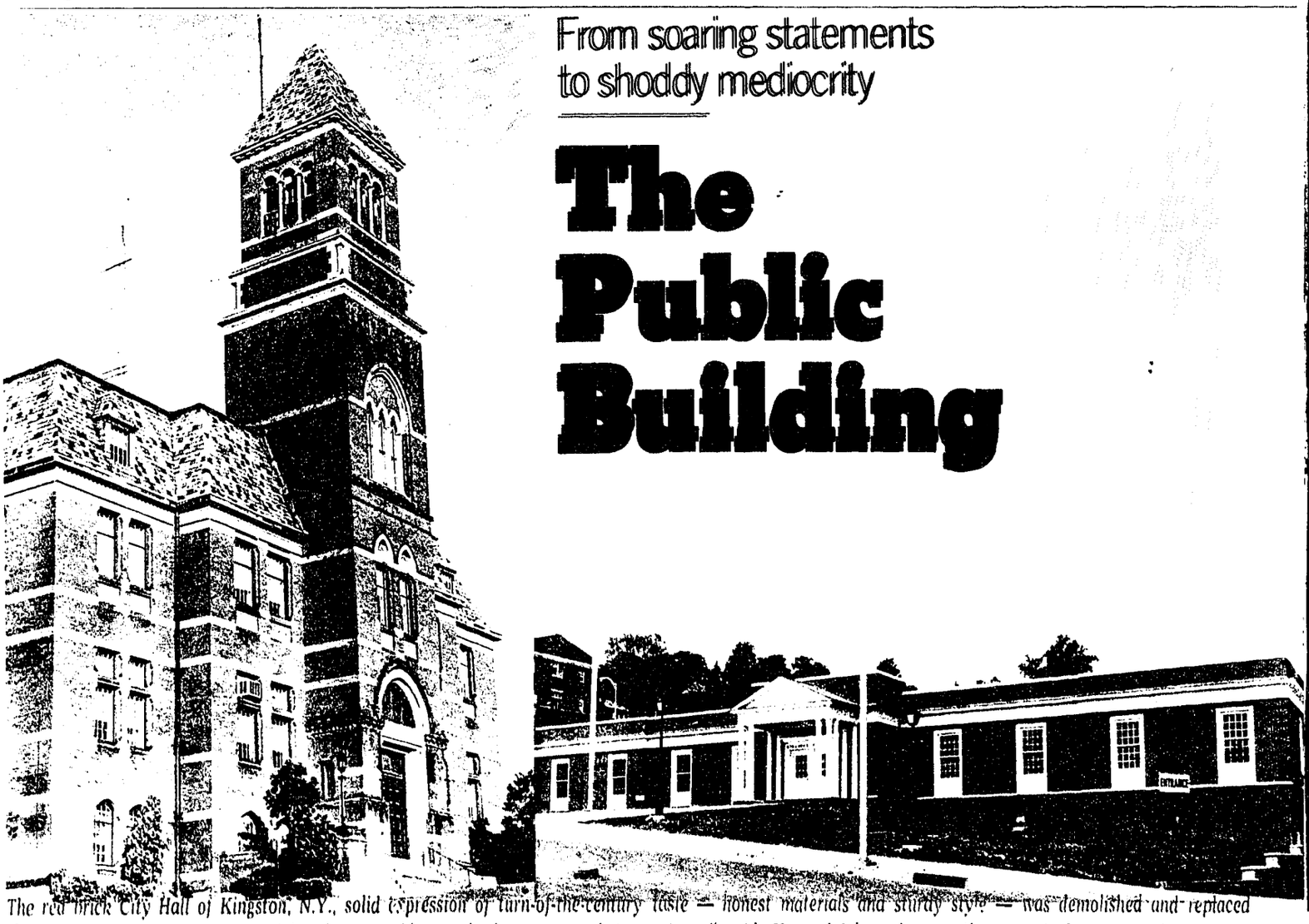

The red brick City Hall of Kingston, N.Y., solid expression of turn-of-the-century taste — honest materials and sturdy style — was demolished and replaced by a would-be Colonial structure (right) that resembles a suburban supermarket or a turnpike-side Howard Johnson's more than a seat of government.

By Ada Louise Huxtable

The public building that serves and symbolizes the institutions of government has always striven for dignity, monumentality, a suggestion of art and an indication of the nobler aspects and ideals of man. Or it did, until recently. One look at most of today's public buildings suggests that somewhere on the way from the 19th to the 20th century a lot of values got lost. Symbolism, as a suggestion of the finer qualities of mind, character or construction, is a thing of the past. Or looked at another way, symbolism is there all right, saying a lot of things about us that we might rather not hear.

The traditional public building stressed a concern for quality of design, materials and details, a certain elaborateness or care that was equated with a superior product, the suggestion of an appropriate setting for public events, and impressive substantiality. In a word, style.

Past centuries devoted the best of their style and craftsmanship, at any given period, to their public construction, and American cities are richer for it. Some notable examples are the Boston and Annapolis State Houses, Independence Hall in Philadelphia, New York's City Hall, the Custom Houses in Boston and New York, and the Capitol in Washington. There are 19th-century city halls and state capitols and courthouses standing in cities and towns across the country, colonnaded, domed and towered, from modest to immense, in ambitious modes from the Greek Revival to Ruskinian Gothic.

They battle for survival. Bulfinch has finally become sacrosanct, but the Victorian monuments are still considered expendable. What goes up in their place can rarely be differentiated from average (read cheap) commercial construction, with a sign over the door to tell the visitor that he is indeed in City Hall, or the seat of country or state government, or a place where the ideals and processes of justice are housed. (You can hardly blame him if he begins to wonder if the ideals and processes are any better than the building.)

There is a complex and revealing set of reasons for the change in public building standards in this century. Among these are a revolution in architectural design, structure and philosophy; a decline of craftsmanship and increasingly industrialized processes and products; and a steady, inexorable inflation of costs and changing labor market, all aided and abetted by an almost total erosion of esthetic standards at the public commission level.

But it may be even more significant that the society building city halls, state houses, Federal structures, courts and custom houses today is a society that reveres the cut corner, the fast buck and the expedient or even shoddy solution as something pragmatically admirable, with deathlessly undistinguished results. And you can't make any of it look any better than it is.

There are very few exceptions. An outstanding one that should be mentioned is the new Boston City Hall by architects Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles. But the birth of that building was so unortnodox — the procedure included strict urban-renewal controls under ironhanded leadership and a national competition with a hand-picked jury— that a building of both style and symbolism resulted. It is the exception, not the rule. Another exception was the saving, rather than the bulldozing, of the old Boston City Hall, a typical Victorian structure that has been beautifully recycled as a prestige office building.

But the norm is illustrated on these pages. The Marion County Courthouse in Indianapolis, designed by Isaac Hodgson in 1876, featured Second

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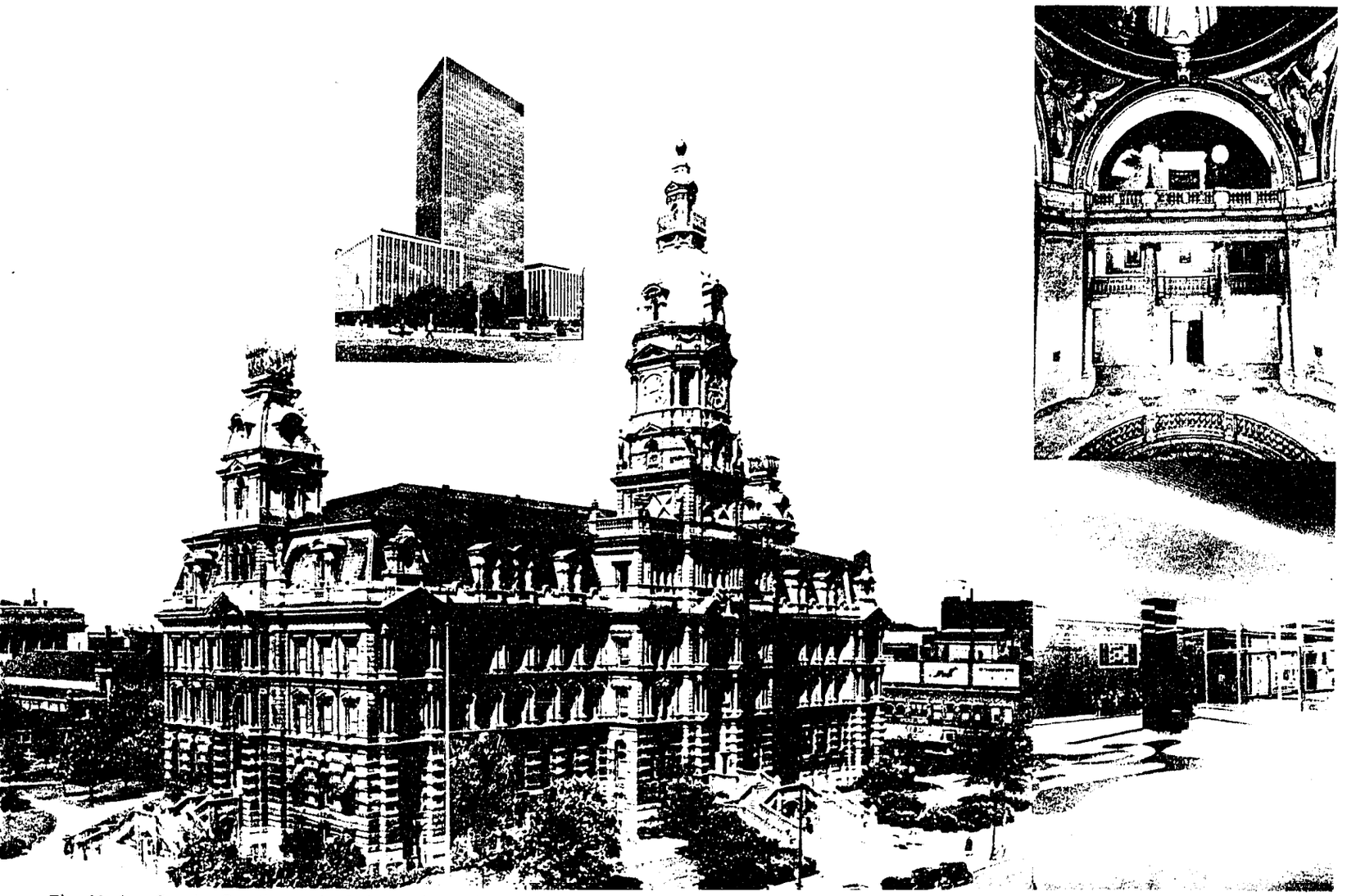

The Marion County Courthouse in Indianapolis, Ind., was replaced by the aluminum-and-glass City-County Building (inset). In Jersey City, the marble-columned rotunda of the abandoned Hudson County Courthouse (top, right) is now boarded up. Present courthouse has a motel-type lobby with plastic plants (above).

Empire rusticated walls and "Renaissance" orders with carved pediments and statuary, elaborately mansarded and crested. It was destroyed in 1962.

In its place is a new City-County headquarters that looks as if someone had pushed a computer button marked "Standard Speculative Office Building." Faceless and anonymous, its consummate dullness is almost a negative achievement. It successfully suggests that beyond the reality of business as usual, there are no longer any large dreams or aspirations, or even any authority in the government process to be respected or expressed through design.

This may very well be true. But since the art of architecture has been a vehicle for that kind of expression for all of recorded history it is a serious loss for our age.

The loss extends to the fact that it is technologically and economically impossible for such structures ever to be built again. This makes it more poignant that the United States Customs Service has exchanged its Cass Gilbert building of 1907 in New York, with its artful, allegorical references to commerce and the sea, for the artless grid and routine commercial references of an addendum to the World Trade Center.

In Hudson County, N.J., the decaying and deserted 1910 courthouse, a custom-designed granite and bronze Beaux Arts structure by Hugh Roberts, stands as a rebuke to the 1966 replacement of ill-matched and ill-fitted catalogue components. Instead of a soaring rotunda with marble columns and murals there is a low-ceilinged lobby with plastic plants and a freeform squiggle in the terrazzo floor. The new building cost $14-million and the old one was built for $3-million, which says a lot about soaring costs. The $3-million bought Italian green and pearl gray marbles; half a century later, $14-million bought paper-thin veneers, plastic, and aluminum that looks like tin. It was all downhill.

In Kingston, N.Y., a typical red brick city hall of the eighteen-nineties—typical in its solid materials and workmanship and legitimate expression of late 19th-century taste and design—has given way to a one-story mock-Colonial city hall in Howard Johnson style. This one crash-landed.

New York is seriously considering demolishing its notorious Tweed Courthouse for something similarly pseudo-Colonial. It is an irony that what was essentially a ripoff (more money went into Tweed's pockets than into the building) still offers more substantial architectural quality than any possible replacement.

Why this deterioration of standards? The answer lies in money, taste, ideals and the political process. Superior materials and refinements of technique are available today only at extraordinary cost. Public agencies simply do not have the resources to indulge in the luxury of excellence. Inflation increasingly promotes recourse to the shoddy.

Even if there were public funds, there is a very curious public attitude toward quality. Quality, since it usually costs something, whether it is in better design, construction or materials or, for that matter, anything above the lowest common denominator, is considered a waste of the taxpayer's money. A good public servant, with his eye on the vote, doesn't waste the taxpayer's money. He delivers atrocious buildings instead.

Which comes right back to values. Today cheapness in a public building is equated with virtue. As long as the elected representatives of the people believe they are fulfilling the wishes of the people by building cheese, they will continue to do so. As long as they value parking space over the majesty of the law, or hack office space over any suggestion that government is a conspicuous achievement of mankind, the cheese-parers have it.

In this general debase- *(Continued on Page 89)*

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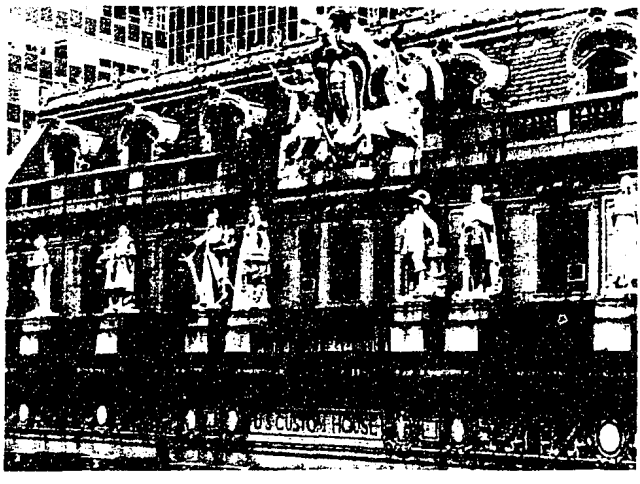

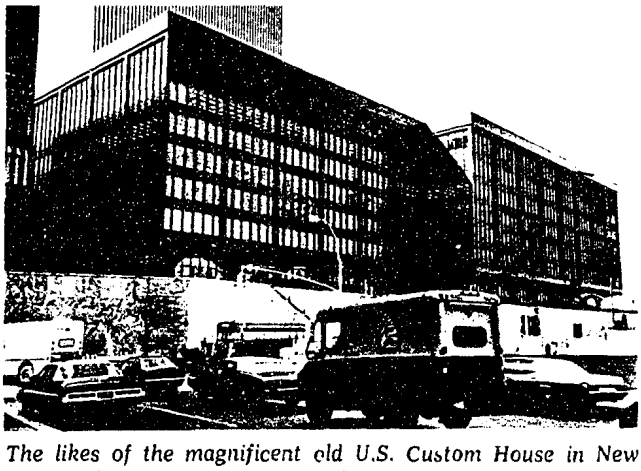

The likes of the magnificent old U.S. Custom House in New York will never be built again. The Cass Gilbert building (top) is now deserted, and the Customs Service is housed in this anonymous segment of the gigantic World Trade Center.

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ment, a not inconsiderable influence is the fact that to all good dollar-pragmatists, design or the art of architecture is a pantywaist frill or extra, rather than an intrinsic part of how a building looks and works, whatever the price. The art of architecture is available, and if anyone really wanted it there would be more good public buildings around to prove it.

Values go hand in hand with the realities of the political process. Architecture is the established, hallowed source of pork barrel and payola; it is the most traditional payoff tool of the American democratic system. And this is a system that no one intends to change. Contracts go to political contributors — for construction, for home-district suppliers of materials, for architectural and engineering services. This guarantees a product as sordid as the process itself.

In government review agencies, architectural designs are submitted to most-square - footage - for - the-money checks, with no consideration of function, esthetics or environmental quality. Knowing what is required, architects selected by the political process deliver preordained mediocrity. The casualties are imagination and creativity as well as symbolism and style, and any appeal to the spirit or the senses.

The immediate fact, of course, is that we are not building political Parthenons, but containers for bureaucrats. Because today's public buildings are actually office buildings dedicated to an exploding office bureaucracy rather than to the large deeds of statesmen, it can be argued that this is a good reason for them to look like office buildings rather than like monuments.

What we have, therefore, are Pop monuments to the cut-rate, the expedient and the ordinary, lacking even the drama of the last hurrah. We are expressing banality with banality, the breakdown of credibility in government with the breakdown of quality of design. When expendable structures go with expendable principles the scenario becomes an architectural Watergate. This may be the ultimate, inescapable symbolism of our time. ■

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