ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

'One of Our Most Important Public Buildings'

DALLAS

This city willed itself into being. According to the local historian A. C. Greene, "It did not come about by historical accident or through natural advantage." There was no real reason for its existence; like so much else in Texas it was promoted into reality by one man, John Neely Bryan, who picked a spot and announced from a promontory on a sometimes river, in Moses-like fashion, that the city was born. Lacking rationale or assets, Dallas made things happen that had no reason to happen, like "bending" the railroad to go through town. This stubborn, willful ingenuity, or making something out of nothing, is the basis of its character and style.

Style is a word one hesitates to use for Dallas. The city may have been fortunate in its possession of true grit, but it has been unfortunate in that its growth has coincided with the period of America's most resolute and profligate destruction of its past for a nondescript present. In downtown Dallas today, one structure—the new Municipal Building by I. M. Pei and Partners (Theodore Amberg in charge), with the local firm of Harper and Kemp—is finally upgrading this image. It also promises to be one of the most important public buildings in the country.

Dallas is now 135 years old, and at the pace the 20th century moves, that just doesn't seem very young anymore. Its excellent Public Library is celebrating its 75th anniversary. It is a cultured and conservative city—sometimes notoriously so—and thinks of itself as the Sunbelt's Boston to Houston's New York.

But its culture is not architectural. It isn't that Dallas

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'A Most Important Public Building'

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has no past: it just isn't there. Mr. Greene's history (which has style), called "The Deciding Years," is a surprisingly rich record of 19th-century buildings burned, demolished and otherwise gotten rid of. They have been replaced by the kind of mid 20th-century conurbation that not only lacks style, but even much sense of place, consisting largely of those interchangeable tall buildings that make up the facelessness of the common commercial culture of most American cities, and a series of new limbos on the freeway. (The style gap was filled—and I mean this seriously—by Nieman Marcus.)

The Municipal Building is unfinished and will not open until next year, but it is complete enough to be judged. With its large forecourt plaza and surrounding public buildings, it forms a new Municipal Center. The plaza is already being used for official occasions and simple daily acts of celebration, providing an urban center that the city never had before. This is a turning point for Dallas.

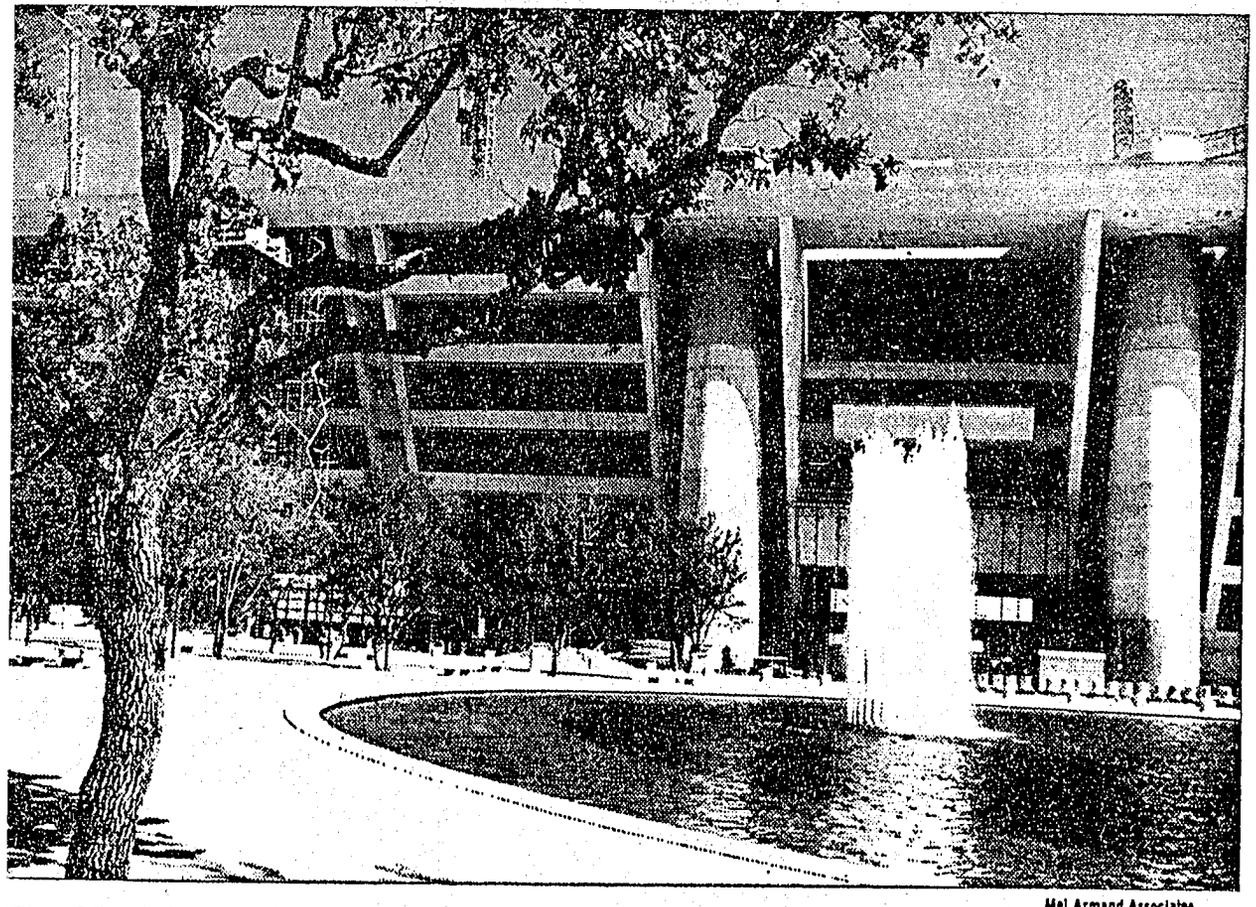
It takes only one important, dominating building in the proper context to make this difference. It also takes a serious work of architecture, and this building is not only serious, it is huge (560 feet, or almost three New York City blockfronts long, and 200 feet wide at the top), calculatedly symbolic, and overwhelmingly strong. It goes beyond architecture to act as a form-giver to an indeterminate city, through the kind of comprehensive planning of its surroundings that pulls formlessness together. And it also functions as a decisive architectural image-maker for the city itself.

With the new Municipal Building and Center, Dallas now evokes a monumental, bold and original design identity inseparable from its official life and functions. Thus is an urban esthetic and a sense of place created.

The only other urban group to compare with it is Boston's immensely successful Government Center, which also features a bold and handsome City Hall. One can argue the architectural merits of one or the other indefinitely, but these two sizable public building projects are undeniably among the most interesting urban constructions of the 20th century. This is true for a complex set of reasons having to do with architecture, culture, symbolism and politics, the art of urbanism and the self-perception of cities—factors of which many significant monuments have been compounded in the past.

Dallas owes its new Government Center to that same willful insistence on making something happen that is its most noticeable heritage, and the man who led the insisting is J. Erik Jonsson, a recent Dallas Mayor and a founder of Texas Instruments—a formidable leadership combination. The obstacles were also formidable, including sharply escalating costs and severe public criticism of the large, ambitious design. The support of the city's prominent citizens, in and out of government, has been particularly impressive, and a lot of laurels should be handed out on opening day.

The new Municipal Building is a massive, horizontal, buff-colored concrete structure with a strikingly slanted, cantilevered front that faces on a seven-acre plaza at the southwest edge of downtown, a space already beautifully paved and planted with live oak and red oak trees. There will be a large Henry Moore sculpture as one approaches the entrance, given by an anonymous Dallas donor when the architect made the need clear. (Texas civic gestures can be stunning.) Under the plaza is a two level parking garage.



Mel Armand Associates

The Municipal Building—"Dallas should feel nothing but pride."

The building's canted front seems to embrace the plaza and the visitor, instead of walling them off. It creates a unity of space and structure that extends to include even the business buildings beyond. It also performs the functional feat of accommodating the number of offices that a municipal bureaucracy requires, in the enlarged top of the building provided by its slope, above the public and ceremonial areas.

There are 770,000 square feet inside. Many of the offices are grouped around a spectacular interior court 98 feet high and over 200 feet long, roofed by three barrel vaults. The quality of the light and space is breathtaking. Equally impressive is the departure from standard government architectural practice, in which such open areas are literally labeled "waste space" and calculated at so much per square foot of misspent taxpayer's money (a favorite and tiresome game from Congress to City Councils). At a time when looking cheap is considered a political virtue, officialdom seldom opts for excellence, as Dallas has here.

Other large areas accommodate the mayor's and city manager's offices and staff and the council chamber. Closest to the ground are the bureaus and departments that have the most public use.

The strength and beauty of this building are intrinsic to its structural design. It is of superbly controlled and finished poured-in-place concrete, and both structure and function can be "read" from the outside. Fourteen vertical, transverse walls frame the building and slope outward to the top; between them are impressive glassed-in clear spans 65 feet, 4 inches wide. The walls are post tensioned throughout. Three fat, round, vertical stair and service towers rise full height; two of them mark the entrance-like pylons.

As part of a comprehensive Municipal Center plan, the building shares facilities with the adjacent convention center, other city offices, and a future public library building opposite. Its monumental horizontality is a deliberate contrast to Dallas's highrise verticality, an esthetic choice that strengthens its symbolism. That symbolism has been achieved through skillful and appropriate exploitation of structure and form. The result is a major work of architecture and urban design.

The project has been 10 years in the making. A budgeted $25 million has risen to $32 million, after seesawing up and down. Not a few Dallas observers have been puzzled and outraged by the design's unconventional and assertive monumentality. But city officials insisted that they wanted a "significant building." They got what they asked for, and even more, as the full effect of a significant building and a significant space on the scale and style of the city emerges. After the dust of construction and controversy settles, Dallas should feel nothing but pride.