

Will Seattle Be Proud Of Its New City Hall?

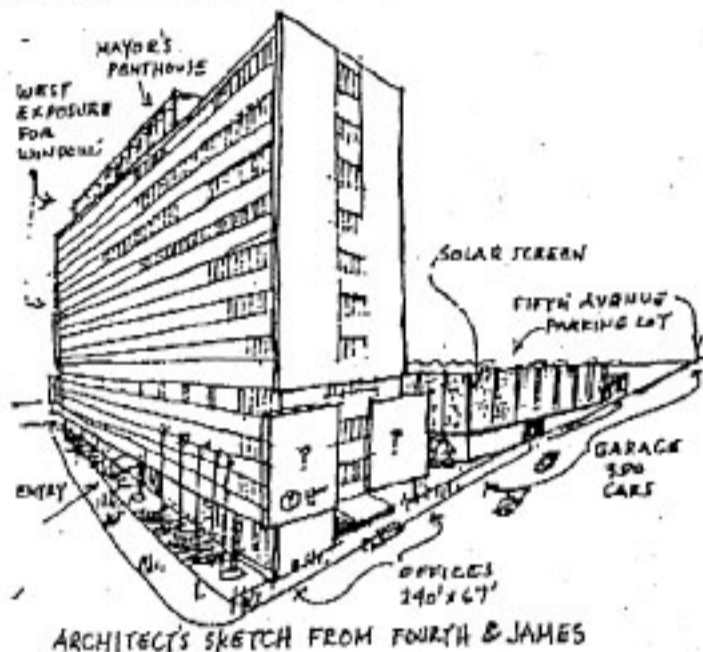
As A Reflection of The City's Culture Present Design Inadequate; Plans Should Be Changed

(In all of the arts, a piece of significant new work—whether a performance of a play, a painting, or a new musical composition—is subjected to critical evaluation. Architecture is the exception, perhaps because architecture is also a profession and a business. However, when a public building as important to the City as our new City Hall is presented, it seems appropriate to offer criticism—especially before plans are finalized. So ARGUS herewith presents one of the first architectural criticisms of such a project—and we hope a most timely one. Councilman Graham has kindly allowed us to view all of the present plans.)

By VICTOR STEINBRUECK

It is said that architecture is a reflection of its times. In the hopes that our posterity may think more highly of us, an architectural criticism of the newly proposed City Hall (and Garage) is offered for those who care.

Perhaps as it stands, the design is actually a reflection of our City Government? However, there are many who feel that a City Hall should represent



ARCHITECT'S SKETCH FROM FOURTH & JAMES

the pinnacle of a city's culture and be the finest possible architecture. Most Seattle architects are among these.

Best Should Be Sought

When a building as important as a City Hall is to be built, the best talent available should be prevailed upon to do the architecture. In this case, the architects were selected as a result of a misdirected call for bids for a "package" offer including design, construction, and financing. This would have circumvented the usual complications and intricacies of obtaining public approval.

The present design, produced in Texas, is little changed from that considered most likely in the earlier call for "bids."

A proper architectural competition would have allowed much more talent to have participated, and resulted in the best possible building. The means of selecting the architect would also have been a source of civic pride. Apparently, the original design package is again offered so it will be unwrapped a little in the hope of favorably influencing the final result.

It is comforting to know that major works of art will be commissioned and that the Art Commission will be consulted in this regard. Decisions regarding the architectural plans are held to be the function of the City Council alone. An evaluation such as would take place in a competent architect's office at this preliminary stage, therefore, seems in the public interest.

The first impression of the only sketch which has been shown is one of a somewhat complicated but quite ordinary combination of buildings. There is little to distinguish it from any other office building of ten years ago. However, it is felt that the quality of design does not come up to the sheer elegance and luxurious offstreet space

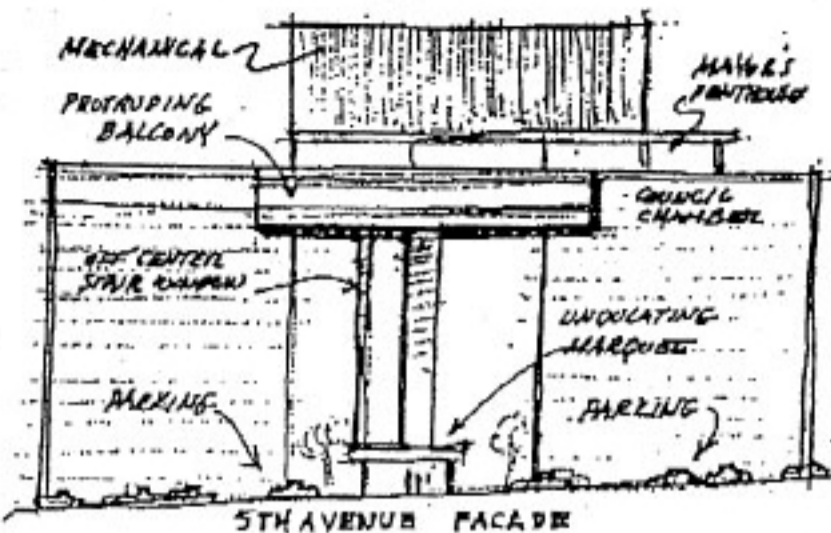
new Washington Building, the direct honesty and simple proportions of the new Logan Building, nor the good massing and directness of the new City Light Building. If this is true, can it then be "a most attractive building of which the City can be proud?" Does anyone believe that it equals the quality of any of our recent high buildings?

Gross Mistake

In locating the main office block, there appears to be a gross mistake in not providing an open public space at Fourth Avenue in relation to the Memorial Plaza of the Public Safety Building across the street. Instead a separate open space results on Fifth Avenue. Developing a spatial continuity with the existing Plaza might have been further related to placing the narrow office block running East and West to avoid the glare of early morning and afternoon sunlight. Windows thus exposed to the good North light and easily controlled South sunlight would improve the office functioning. Could this be a solution based on Texas climate?

Further study of the rest of the building and of the plans indicate the view published is the best one. The Fifth Avenue approach may be disturbing because of rather elementary architectural flaws. In the first place, one approaches through a parking lot under an undulating canopy, more than 100 feet long, under which one cannot look up to see the building. Perhaps that is not too bad though, because the building appears to develop a real awkwardness in its upper regions. Its absolutely symmetrical form is topped by a very obviously unsymmetrical 11th Floor Mayor's Penthouse and even more disproportionate and heavy mechanical penthouse above that. This appears as "an out of drawing" error in the Fourth and James per-

... New City Hall



spective, but it is really true.

A few minor flaws which will surely be corrected are a strange protruding balcony and councilman's "catwalk" at the 11th Floor Council Chambers. The monotonous equality of proportion of the horizontal terra cotta spandrels and the windows will undoubtedly be more carefully considered as the design is improved.

An Unsolved Problem

On the James and Cherry Street facades, there is an unsolved problem of the garage feathering out to nothing at the Fifth Avenue street level and appearing downhill as a "solar screen" (?). One wonders about screening cars from the sun and not people? Good design demands a harmony between two elements of a building such as the office and garage units. Here, an attempt at independence is experienced. Perhaps this is a reflection of work done in Texas and in Seattle?

Many architects have questioned the peculiar projecting square panels at the North and South ends of the Second and Third floors. There is no apparent reason for their existence since all floors seem to be similar. The horizontal overhang of the Second Floor along Fourth Avenue becomes awkward as the height diminishes to the higher sidewalk at Cherry Street.

The interiors are not yet fully developed so an observation regarding an obvious difficulty should be welcomed. The elevator lobbies are only approximately nine feet wide with opposing banks of two elevators each. (Most bedrooms are wider

than nine feet). (On which side will the next elevator arrive?). Toilet facilities seem adequate.

Architecturally, it is questionable whether this is really a first-rate building—especially considering what it ought to be. All of the problems of the building—the lack of spatial relation to the Memorial Plaza, the orientation of the offices, the unimaginative exterior appearance, the disparate forms, the unsolved relations between the garage and the City Hall, and the awkward grade relations on James and Cherry Streets indicate that a great deal more talent should be exercised before this building becomes a reality. Possibly our Councilmen have recognized their responsibility for the architectural plans and have so directed the architects?

So far, the proposed new City Hall does not fulfill the consummate demands of fine architecture, the most difficult of all of the arts. Does Seattle deserve a better building for its City government?

60 Years Ago

From The Argus of March 17, 1903
Hiram C. Gill, who was defeated by two votes for reelection as councilman, has filed a contest for the seat.

John F. Miller, who has been mining in Alaska for several years, has returned to Seattle to practice law.

Mentioned as possible gubernatorial candidates for the fall election are ex-Governor McGraw, John R. Kinnear, J. M. Frink, H. C. Henry and J. M. Langley.