# The Half-Life of Buildings

*Are "great" buildings still great forty years later?*

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**THE TERM** "instant classic" is often used to describe a new building, but how long does architecture really last? Time can be cruel to bestselling authors (who today reads Thomas B. Costain or Grace Metalious?), hit movies (tried to watch "The Ten Commandments" lately?), and popular fashions (remember bell-bottom trousers and Nehru jackets?). Are buildings immune?

Perhaps the most graphic example of short-lived greatness currently in the news is Boston City Hall. In 1962, Boston held a national architectural competition for a new city hall, attracting 256 entries. Gerhard Kallmann, Michael McKinnell, and Edward Knowles, all Columbia

University professors, came out of proverbial nowhere to win. Their design was a bold interpretation of what is sometimes called the Brutalist style, then very much in vogue. Brutalism (derived from the French béton brut, or raw concrete) was popularized by the French architect Le Corbusier in the late 1950s in buildings such as the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles and the Indian state capital of Chandigarh. Brutalism's chief hallmarks were monumental forms, a superhuman scale, and above all the extensive use of exposed concrete, inside and out. The architects of Boston City Hall were influenced by Le Corbusier's work, especially the monastery of Sainte-Marie-de-la-Tourrette, near Lyons (completed in 1959). The best-known Brutalist building in the United States is probably Paul Rudolph's Yale Art and Architecture Building, which was nearing completion at the time of the Boston competition.

When Boston City Hall was finished in 1969, it received the American Institute of Architects' prestigious Honor Award, the influential critic of the *New York Times* described the building as "spectacular," and later a national poll of architects and historians ranked it sixth among the "greatest buildings in American history." But in 2006, only thirty-seven years later, Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino proposed selling the building and building a new city hall in South Boston. He was on safe political ground in making this suggestion, for City Hall was unpopular among both the people who worked in it and the general public. Employees disliked the labyrinthine interior, complained about inadequate heating in winter, and blamed dampness and mold for sick-building syndrome. Most Bostonians disliked the architecture. People tolerate International-Style modernism as "functional" and "clean," but Brutalist architects indulged in heroic sculptural effects that had nothing to do with function, and the bare concrete surfaces, which were often bush-hammered to expose the aggregate (which made the concrete even rougher) were anything but clean, and to most observers simply looked cheap. It didn't help that City Hall was surrounded by a nine-acre plaza (part of an I. M. Pei master plan) that resisted all efforts to introduce activity, remaining windswept, inhospitable and inhuman.

It is important to note that among many architects, Boston City Hall was—and is—admired. As late as 1991, a poll of architects included Boston City Hall (as well as the Yale Art and Architecture Building and the La Tourrette convent) among the "100 most important buildings of the last 100 years." In fact, a group of architects has recently petitioned the Boston Landmark Commission to grant City Hall special landmark status (it is less than fifty years old). Landmark status

**Figure 1:** Boston City Hall

would prevent demolition, which is the likely outcome if Mayor Menino (who revived his proposal to sell city hall last year) has his way. The case is pending.

Boston City Hall has an important lesson to teach clients: beware the avant-garde. Commissioning an unusual or novel design does not guarantee that thirty years hence that design will not be outmoded, even if—especially if—it styles itself as "avant-garde." In fact, very few buildings prophesy the future. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, one of the masters of twentieth-century modernism, designed the unusual Lake Shore Drive Apartments in Chicago for developer Henry Greenwald in 1948. The steel-and-glass design of the apartment towers really was avant-garde, anticipating the glass curtain wall of the Fifties and Sixties, and it still maintains its timeless modernity. But most unusual buildings remain stuck firmly to their time. Brutalism, for example, lasted just a decade after Boston City Hall. By the 1970s, most architects (including even the designers of the city hall) had given it up, and were designing more traditional-looking buildings that included historical references, an approach that became known as Postmodernism. Clients should resist the suggestion that an unusual building design is "ahead of its time." The design may be

unusual, even unprecedented, but chances are that in thirty years it, too, will look old and dated. The important question should be: Is it a good building?

## FUNCTION

"Good" means useful and well as beautiful. The Richards Medical Research Building (1957-60) at the University of Pennsylvania was a project that brought then little-known Louis I. Kahn public acclaim. The concept involved a cluster of towers containing glazed laboratories in studio-like spaces, with solid brick shafts containing stairs and mechanical services. The clear architectural expression of the two functions was novel, and the dramatic contrast between the glass studios and the heavy brick towers was striking. Shortly after Richards was built, the Yale architectural historian Vincent Scully called it "one of the greatest buildings of modern times," and the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted an exhibit devoted solely to the building. Students of architecture, the author included, made pilgrimages to Philadelphia just to see the Richards building.

While Richards remains an important milestone in Kahn's career, its status has considerably diminished over the years. This is due in part to its functional short-

**Figure 2:** Richards Medical Research Building, University of Pennsylvania

comings, and in part because the design was superseded by the architect's later work. The functional shortcomings were serious: large amounts of glass produced too much light and glare in the laboratories; the complicated exposed concrete structure was not only expensive but also environmentally troublesome due to falling dust; and the studio concept provided too little flexibility for researchers. Far from representing the future, Richards quickly became passé: the design did not herald a new trend in lab design. In the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, completed shortly after Richards, Kahn abandoned the idea of studios and service shafts altogether, and designed much more conventional laboratories with large open floor plates, and pipes and ducts above suspended ceilings. The Salk Institute is generally considered Kahn's masterpiece, and has successfully maintained its architectural stature—and its utility—over more than forty years.

While the planning of the Salk Institute takes future space requirements into account more successfully than Richards, that does not mean parts of the buildings will not, at some point, become functionally obsolete. In the past, when technology evolved more slowly, buildings were functionally useful for a decade or more. Beginning in the nineteenth century, with gas lighting and plumbing, and followed by electricity, air-conditioning, and communications, technology has had a major impact on a building's usefulness. But technological changes are almost always unpredictable, hence unanticipated in a building's design. For example, the designers of Salk in 1965 could not be expected to anticipate wireless communications, low-e glass, the need for energy conservation, or the way that computers would alter work habits. One of the common claims of modern architecture is adaptability and flexibility. The implied promise is that the useful life of a building can be extended from the usual twenty to forty years to sixty to a hundred years, through the provision of features such as larger spans, movable walls, adjustable spaces, adaptable infrastructure, and so on. For the owner, the veracity of the claim is important, since flexibility always comes at a steep price. But the spotty record of buildings that have attempted—with very limited success—to advance the concept of infinite adaptability (the Pompidou Center, Lloyds of London), suggests that any promise to extend the useful life of a building through design should be examined with great skepticism.

Aesthetics and function are intertwined in the case of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Library in Washington, D.C., designed by Mies van der Rohe in 1966 (though not completed until 1972, after the architect's death). While not a ground-breaking work, the four-story pavilion is a charac-

teristic Mies design, and the famous architect's only public library. Nevertheless, in 2006, a task force appointed by Mayor Anthony A. Williams found the King Library to be "an outmoded structure erected long before the advent of the digital world," and recommended selling the building and building a new library on another site. The thirty-four-year-old library is undoubtedly technologically obsolete, but old buildings can be upgraded, as the venerable New York City Public Library has been successfully—several times. However, the New York library is a well-loved building; the King Library appears to have been not loved at all. Over the years it has suffered from insensitive modifications, deferred maintenance, and abuse. This may have something to do with the design. Mies van der Rohe's brand of steel-and-glass modernism is not Brutalist, but its relentless modularity, minimal use of color (mostly black, in the case of the library), and dependence on undifferentiated spaces appear distinctly bleak and austere to many. In a successful Mies building, minimalism is offset by the use of rich materials and carefully-considered details; however, the budget of the library required replacing travertine and custom-designed furnishings with brick and off-the-shelf items.

Mies van der Rohe intended the library to be useful for a long time to come, but he didn't take into account a change in the social role that libraries are expected to play today. In the last few decades, a number of American cities—Chicago, San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Denver, Albuquerque, Seattle, Nashville—have built new, architecturally striking libraries. The general aim is to attract a younger public to an old institution. Implicit is the hope that novel eye-catching architecture can compete with Google and Wikipedia, which, in many ways, have made so many of the functions of public libraries obsolete. Thus, the chief motive for moving out of the old King Library was less to provide functional improvements than to build a new "exciting" building. Clearly, just fixing up a distinctly un-exciting old building was not an attractive alternative.

There is some evidence that attendance at new libraries does rise, at least in the short run. However, the important question is: what happens several decades hence, when the once eye-catching architecture is taken for granted; when what is fashionable—sculptural shapes, or glass roofs, or spacious atriums—goes the way of Brutalism and bush-hammered concrete? Las Vegas casino owners have learned that using architecture to attract the public is an expensive proposition. To be effective, crowd-pleasing architecture must be regularly upgraded or replaced, since the design bar is constantly being raised, and the public always

**Figure 3:** Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, Washington, D.C., 1972

**Figure 4:** Seattle Public Library, 2004

wants more. Once you've seen the exploding volcano three or four times, you're ready for something else.

## TASTE

It is often said about unpopular buildings that "people don't like this today, but they will grow to like it in time." You could call it the Eiffel Tower Argument. It is a shaky foundation for design, and it is less common that is generally believed. It is true that architectural tastes change every thirty or forty years. Certain colors and materials go in and out of fashion; people like more decoration or less, more luxury or less, more change or less. In high-rise office buildings, for example, Mies' minimalist modernism dominated from 1950 to the 1970s; in 1984, the AT&T building heralded the advent of more colorful designs, many a throwback to more traditional skyscrapers. That lasted about two decades. The current generation of towers tends to eschew historical references, uses more glass, and introduces sculptural shapes. By 2030 or 2040, these trends can be expected to change once more. The interesting thing about changing tastes is that they are generational. One generation rejects the taste of its predecessor, but the following generation may find something of interest in the rejects. When construction of Philadelphia's City Hall started in 1871, for example, its ornate Second Empire style was in vogue. By the time the enormous building was finished, thirty years later, its architecture was already out of date—Beaux-Arts classicism was all the rage. The city hall, with its tall mansard roofs and florid interiors, struck people as downright old-fashioned, if not dowdy. The vast stone pile became something of an embarrassment, and calls to demolish the building started in the 1920s and continued for decades. It was not until the 1980s that Philadelphians began to come to terms with their city hall. An insensitive 1950s-era modification to the interior was undone, rooms were refurbished, and the exterior was restored. Part of the reason for this change of heart was a renewed appreciation for old buildings, the result of the historic preservation movement. Also, public taste had changed, producing a renewed appreciation of the city hall's rather overblown architectural style.

Another example of a building affected by changing taste is New York's Chrysler Building, completed in 1930. At first, William Van Alen's brash Art Deco design, with its flamboyant stainless-steel top and its automobile motifs (stylized hood-ornament gargoyles, winged radiator caps, a frieze of steel hubcaps, and black brick accents that suggest running boards), was not widely admired. Lewis Mumford, *The New Yorker*'s architecture critic called it a "stunt design," and the

*New York Times* likewise derided the blatant commercialism of the architecture. During the Fifties and Sixties, Chrysler was a distinct oddity, so different from the glass-and-steel boxes of that time. Today it is hard to imagine New York's skyline without the popular landmark.

One of the most striking Manhattan skyscrapers of the Thirties is 30 Rockefeller Plaza (formerly the RCA Building), the centerpiece of Rockefeller Center. When the building opened in 1933, the seventy-story skyscraper, designed by a team of architects led by Raymond Hood, was the paragon of American modern architecture, a combination of Beaux-Arts design principles, an Art Deco aesthetic, and construction know-how. Like the other buildings at Rockefeller Center, the limestone tower incorporated many examples of figurative art: elaborate gilded and polychrome sculptures over the main entrance, monumental pylons capped by heroic human figures on 50th Street, and vast murals in the lobbies. This fusion of stripped-down architecture, streamlined decoration, and "Moderne" art was new and exciting in 1933, but thirty years later, architecture had taken a very different path, away from American modern to the more minimalist style of Mies van der Rohe. Modern buildings no longer incorporated art or decoration: at most there was a Henry Moore or an Alexander Calder sculpture on the plaza; the interiors tended to be monochrome and undecorated. The most lavish interiors at Rockefeller Center were in Radio City Music Hall, and would likely have been gutted if, in 1978, they had not been declared a New York City Landmark. Yet tastes came full circle, and in 1999, the Music Hall was totally renovated to great public acclaim. As for 30 Rockefeller Plaza, it continues

**Figure 5:** Rockefeller Plaza, New York City

to be a Class A office building, much in demand (and has given its name to a popular television show).

## CONCLUSION

Buildings achieve greatness in different ways. Some are recognized immediately, and some grow on people. On the other hand, some buildings enter with a splash and fizzle over the years. Most buildings have ups and downs. The hardest test for a building is probably its thirtieth birthday, when the public taste has turned away from the values that prompted the original design. That is when calls for demolition or drastic change are most likely to be heeded. If a building weathers this period, there is a chance that, in another decade or two, it may be appreciated again. It helps if a building is functionally as well as aesthetically outstanding; the argument that great architecture should be held to a different practical standard is always a hard one to make, especially to a building's owner. An important variable among buildings is whether they capture people's affection. Sometimes, simply familiarity can breed affection. The Empire State Building is in this category: it has captured the public's imagination, not merely because of its long record as tallest building in the world, but also because its characteristic silhouette has become an integral part of the city's skyline. It is not enough that a building be popular with the general public, however; it must also be loved by its owners (the taxpayers, in the case of public buildings). If owners love a building, they will put up with a certain degree of dysfunction—no building is perfect—and they will take the trouble to maintain it, make repairs, upgrade obsolete technological systems, and spruce it up every twenty to forty years. If a building fails to capture its owner's favor, however, even greatness may not be protection against the threat of the wrecker's ball.