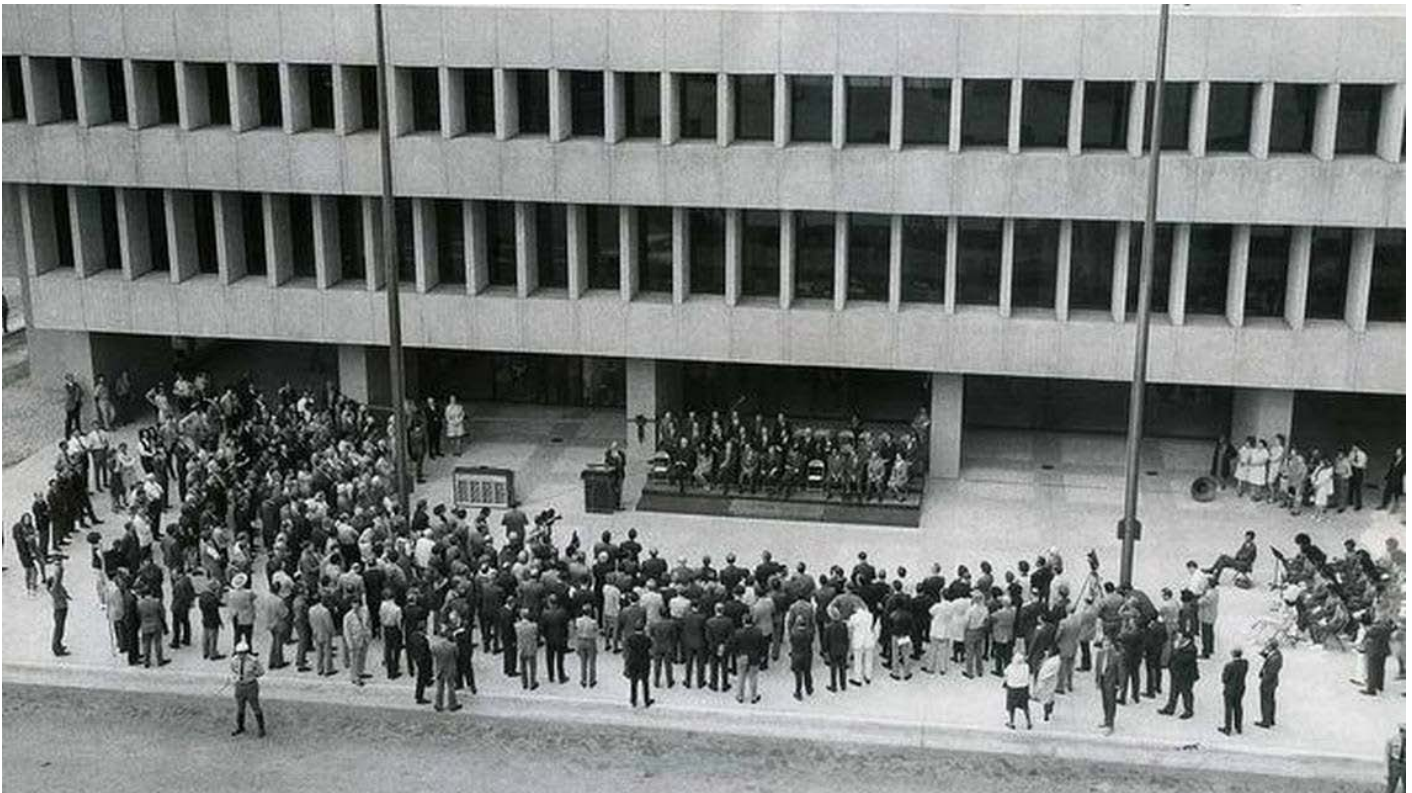


Why I Like Fort Worth's City Hall for Today and Tomorrow

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A crowd attended the grand opening of Fort Worth's City Hall in 1971. *STAR-TELEGRAM ARCHIVES*

City Hall in Fort Worth is more than a building — it's a symbol of how we govern ourselves. All buildings express a philosophy, and City Hall, designed by architect Edward Durell Stone in 1968, was shaped to express an open and accessible government.

There has been talk of abandoning City Hall, but it might be a mistake to leave behind the building and how it reflects our democratic values. It's common to devalue contemporary buildings for a number of reasons, but perhaps the most common is because the structures are so familiar they don't seem special to us. Even so-called Victorians didn't feel anyone should preserve Victorian buildings, but their grandchildren felt that kind of architecture, and what is represented, should be preserved.

An open and accessible government is expressed at City Hall, with large expanses of glass at the sidewalk level. City Hall is literally "see-through," in that you can stand on one side of the building and see across the block to the other sidewalk. The open structure fitted with panels of clear glass allows anyone to see what's going on inside. This openness is continued at the interior of the building with an expansive atrium that opens onto work areas. The architect set the atrium down into the ground, below street level, and rooted the city services to a permanent place. If the main space of City Hall was on a pedestal, lifted above the everyday, then there would have been a sense that we have to climb to reach our civil servants, and that would have been a very different idea of governance.

There are practical aspects to the design as well. The building fits into the climate by having broad overhangs that provide covered and shaded walkways on all sides. During the summer, these shaded walkways are a relief from the sun, with breezes flowing through to cool off pedestrians. These covered areas have been the place of city-sponsored events in the past, so the building offers a kind of front porch where we can gather and interact. Because of this feature, the building is welcoming and protecting on all sides — qualities one expects of healthy institutions.

Some feel that city services should grow and others that services should shrink. If that conversation results in the need for more space, then we should recall that city officials and Stone envisioned ways to grow City Hall. It's not likely that our city services warrant a large addition. A building that houses public and private functions, perhaps to the south of City Hall, might be an option. The city could expand or contract like any business without sacrificing its unique place and its unique architecture.

Too many great buildings have been lost in the hasty or ill-advised current of the moment. We know enough about buildings and people to make things adapt to changing times. Institutions should take the long view — not just to the future, but also to our past — to make things fit today.