

Clockwise from upper left:
Chicago Federal Center;
Albany Empire State Plaza;
Boston Government Center;
New Orleans Civic Center;
Honolulu Capitol District
and Civic Center;
Scottsdale (Arizona) Civic
Center; Orange County
(California) Civic Center.



Effects, Fictions, and Contradictions of American Government Architecture

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From the 1930s on, American government grew by leaps and bounds. The emergencies of the Great Depression and Second World War led to a concerted enlargement of citizens' benefits and rights, and of the Cold War warfare state. The conjoined expansion and defense of democracy required unprecedented levels of financing and management. The number of federal workers increased from nine hundred thousand in 1939 to 2.5 million in 1962. Individual state and local governments (to which administration of the national welfare state was largely delegated) added four million workers in the 1960s alone.¹ All had to be accommodated physically. Mainly this was improvised in millions of square feet of rented offices, as well as scattershot, nondescript, modernist government office buildings from Los Angeles to New York.²

But there also were constructed around the country a number of large-scale, more or less purposefully coordinated, ensembles of government buildings and outdoor spaces. In this article, seven government centers, selected for their conspicuous size and architectural complexity as well as archival resources and geographic spread, constitute a set of landmark objects and events marking this expanded government presence, from Boston to Honolulu.³ Because they are formally varied and lacking shared authorship and origins, these postwar American government centers have not heretofore been considered as a group. But behind all were forces of economic urban renewal generating their scale. Dynamics of American federalism produced relations between structures. Expanded ideals of democratic citizenship activated their public spaces. More than analysis of individual buildings allows, a collective study of postwar American government centers demonstrates that they possessed common political, economic, and design features and argues for their historical significance, architecturally embodying complex postwar dynamics among state and capitalism, efficiency and democracy.

Before proceeding to collective analysis, introducing the seven, one by one, highlights the common forces behind their development. Three were constructed for a single level of government. When the U.S. federal administration concentrated workspaces in Chicago's downtown

Loop district for the growing welfare-warfare state's various agencies, including the departments of Defense and Health, Education, and Welfare, and the Internal Revenue Service, in order to raise funds, the office of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed the one-and-a-half-million square-foot Chicago Federal Center (1959–1974). The modular minimalism of this trio of glass-and-steel boxes—two soaring office and courthouse buildings plus a low post office—shared with corporate America a look of business-like efficiency.⁴ Under American federalism and New Deal-era legislation to check central government power, much public welfare administration was delegated to individual states. Thus, this level of the American state grew administratively, too. In Albany, New York State appended to the old Capitol the new Empire State Plaza on a 98-acre cleared urban renewal site set high above the older city. Around a vast new mall, seven office slabs were added for state employment, labor, health, and motor vehicle agencies, plus two distinctive state museum and performing arts buildings to facilitate citizens' collective cultural identities (Harrison and Abramowitz, and others, 1961–1976).⁵ At the same time, local government also required accommodation, especially in booming Western metropolises fueled by new industries and highways. Outside Phoenix, Arizona, the city of Scottsdale erected a new city hall, plus library and arts center structures, all in low, adobe-looking concrete buildings around a picturesque park. These altogether aspired to “a new association with government,” wrote architect Bennie Gonzales, “an open invitation for citizens to participate in their government” (1966–1976).⁶

More often postwar government centers compounded together different components of the American state. In Boston each level of government pursued its own architectural agenda in an urban renewal scheme loosely ranged around the base of Beacon Hill. A low, monumental City Hall (Kallmann, McKinnell, and Knowles, 1962–1969) fronted a large, open, pedestrian plaza among larger Massachusetts state structures (Paul Rudolph; Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson, and Abbott, 1962–1971) and a U.S. federal skyscraper (The Architects Collaborative, 1961–1966).⁷ New Orleans replaced a decaying, working-class Black neighborhood with a new City Hall slab (Goldstein, Parham and Labouisse, with Favrot, Reed, Mathes, and Bergman, 1951–1957) paired with Louisiana state buildings (August Perez, 1955–1958), angled around a grassed plaza axially oriented to the distant line of Elk Place toward the old

Below: Federal Center, Chicago, 1959–1974. Office of L. Mies van der Rohe (G. Summers). Credit: HB-39277-T, Chicago History Museum, Hedrich-Blessing Collection; Jim Hedrich and Bob Shimer, photographers.

Opposite, top: Empire State Plaza, Albany, 1961–1976. Harrison and Abramowitz, and others. Credit: Box 13 (Collection I), Folder 5, Wallace K. Harrison architectural drawings and papers, Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

Opposite, bottom: Scottsdale (Arizona) Civic Center, 1966–1976. Bennie Gonzales. Courtesy of the Scottsdale Historical Society/Scottsdale Public Library.



town.⁸ In Santa Ana, California, a new downtown government center was impelled by the aims of local economic urban renewal and booming suburban regional growth. After running up against conservative Orange County's traditional limited-government ethos, however, the expansion of the sprawling Civic Center campus, begun in 1951, proceeded slowly and ad hoc. With parking lots and open spaces alternating with a disparate array of federal, state, county, and city buildings, the whole was held together loosely by a mid-1960s landscape design by Garrett Eckbo, featuring a tree-lined axis aimed at the high slab of the Richard Neutra-designed County Courthouse.⁹ As for the country's newest state capitol, built in Honolulu (John Carl Warnecke with Belt, Lemmon and Lo, 1961–1970), it featured an open-air oculus and permeable peristyle inflected to climate and democratic citizenry. This capitol also anchored other state, federal, and municipal buildings in a park setting, including, uniquely for the United States, a historic, nineteenth-century royal palace that local Hawaiian elites fought vigorously to preserve.¹⁰

A constellation of plural architectures, individuated in form, context, and history, these postwar American government nevertheless share a common background: All were shaped by postwar American forces of government growth and capitalist redevelopment, by the politics of an evolving democracy, and by the aesthetics of architectural modernism.

Political theorist and historian Timothy Mitchell has named as “state

effects” the material practices that mask the absence of the abstractly conceived idealized state. Through this concept Mitchell defines the apparent boundary between the state “as a coherent object separate from society” not as a “real” division but rather the “metaphysical effect of practices,” “represented and reproduced in visible, everyday forms, such as . . . the architecture of public buildings.”¹¹ Postwar American government centers, this article will show, architecturally produced the state effects of unity, stability, and distinction between public and private, as well as gave the postwar American state a novel appearance of being business-like in efficiency and democratically enlarged in citizenship. These last two aspects were in symbiotic relation,



the expanded welfare-administrative state legitimated by its apparent rationality.

I supplement Mitchell's insights about state effects with Bernardo Zacka's focused theory of the modern administrative state as a "collective fiction," inspired by Pierre Bourdieu. The state's fiction is constituted by bureaucrats' ordinary actions and the state's material artifacts, including architecture, which, Zacka writes, "reassemble the world around them into novel configurations" and "[play] a part modulating relationships between citizens and bureaucrats and in constituting the publics assembled there."¹² Zacka's theory of the administrative state's collective fiction seems especially appropriate for studying postwar American government centers, because their ample public plazas and interior public service areas are sites where citizens of an expanded postwar American social democracy identify themselves as such, in explicit relation to the state.

Where citizens materially meet the state, government centers can thus also be conceived as loci of "policy effects" and "sites of political learning," drawing from political scientist Suzanne Mettler.¹³ Architecture can be seen as an aspect of "policy designs [that] shape citizens' personal experiences with government and hence influence processes of political learning and patterns of political beliefs," including trust and distrust in the state as well, what Mettler terms the "conundrum" of the modern American "government-citizen disconnect."¹⁴ Pondering the paradox of, on the one hand, expanded postwar material benefits (e.g., tax breaks, student loans, mortgage subsidies) and, on the other hand, rising antagonism toward the state, Mettler asks, "How can government do so much, yet be so despised?"¹⁵

The narrative arc of this article is addressed at Mettler's question, though I recast the contradiction as a dialectic. The postwar American state, precisely *because* it did so much, including architecturally, produced its own abjection. Its desired architectural effects of unity, stability, and distinction have been undermined by porous boundaries between public and private interests, by dis-coordinated federalism, and by the illegibility of modern architecture. Thus, as I will argue, collective fictions and state effects complement each other in this contradiction. The contradictions between the collective fiction of the postwar American state's business-like efficiency and expanded democracy have led to what might be characterized as American government centers' *ineffective* state effects. The American government did so much architecturally, and *thus* wound up being so despised.

To commence the architectural analysis: Postwar American government centers achieved a characteristic effect of unified distinction from the rest of society by drawing physical and functional boundaries

between government and commerce. Public officials legislated defined planning boundaries for these government centers—in which existed older buildings, often commercial uses, and usually working-class people—would be cleared, then rebuilt and redeveloped for superblock ensembles concentrated for the efficiency and convenience of exclusively public facilities—city halls, government offices, and open spaces. Federal policy until 1976 prohibited nongovernmental functions in U.S. government buildings.¹⁶ Even simple pushcarts were at first banned from Boston's City Hall Plaza, to avoid competition with downtown businesses.¹⁷

Various state actors helped produce these government centers. In some instances, singular elected officials pushed the projects, like New Orleans Mayor Chep Morrison and New York State Governor Nelson Rockefeller who, by consensus opinion, “treated the enterprise as his own personal project.”¹⁸ Every government center construction also required unelected officials to manage detailed planning and implementation. Sometimes administrative staff initiated the projects, as in the case of city facilities director Brooke Duncan, for whom New Orleans's civic center plaza was named. Unelected administrators often operated autonomously and sometimes in active tension with elected politicians, like famous Boston Redevelopment Authority chief Ed Logue, perceived as the scourge of neighborhood autonomy. The more obscure U.S. General Services administrator Franklin Floete, whose agency managed federal buildings, successfully sparred with mayors, senators, and congresspeople over the location of new federal structures for Chicago and in Boston, resistant to partnering fully with urban renewal agendas because he “did not want to have shabby neighbors.”¹⁹

Floete's obstructionism represents a characteristic instance of an American state often disunited in will and purpose in constructing government centers and dis-coordinated between different levels of government, a consequence of American federalism's constitutionally divided authority. Whenever municipal, state, and federal levels of government were corralled into concentrated centers for economic, operational, and aesthetic benefits, the different layers of government operated more or less independently. State, local, and federal officials determined separately the siting and design of their individual buildings, commissioning their own architects from private practice with predictably heterogenous aesthetic results. The Orange County Civic Center campus in Santa Ana represents an especially libertarian collection, loosely organized in a checkerboard pattern between 1952 and 1971 from a series of different master plans by William L. Faulkner, Richard Neutra, Whitney R. Smith, Garrett Eckbo, and William Blurock, and populated by a disparate array of modernist structures, each arising

years apart on its own site, largely oblivious to neighboring architects' aesthetics except for common modularism, including Neutra and Ramberg's county courthouse (1965–1968), Blurock's state building (1972) and federal building (1971–1975), Ramberg and Lowrey's city hall (1972), Leroy Rose's county hall of administration (1975–1978), and Gimeno and Keally's public library (1960).

Even when there was a single branch of government patronage, and the possibility of a singular designer, the actual products, over the long period it necessarily took to conceive, gestate, and realize these complex schemes, were the results less of a singular author than a relay of designs evolving from one set of actors to another, who varied as well in professional expertise: regional and city planners, urban designers, interior space specialists, and architects. In Albany, planner Maurice Rotival set the site and platform scheme for the Wallace K. Harrison-credited complex.²⁰ In Chicago, several civic center schemes from 1949 onward prefigured and predetermined the Mies office's Federal Center skyscrapers-and-plaza composition.²¹ In Boston, urban designer Kevin Lynch conceived the plaza layout finalized by Henry Cobb of I.M. Pei's office.²² Among the landmarks in our set, only the small-scale Scottsdale Civic Center can be attributed to a single-designer, Bennie Gonzalez. All others are of complicated, compound authorship. This discoordinated site planning and architectural heterogeneity expressed the absence of a coherent American federal state, undermining the state effect of governmental unity. In this regard, postwar American government centers stand apart from more coherently realized contemporary global comparands, such as the famous capitol complexes in Brasilia and Chandigarh.

The fictionality of postwar American government centers as distinctive public unities is also made evident in their shared imbrications with ambitious efforts of urban renewal, which aimed to use government investment to prime the private commercial revival of downtowns in the face of the postwar decentralization of businesses and residences. This was the case not only in older cities of Boston, Albany, and Chicago, but also in newer, Western conurbations of Greater Phoenix's Scottsdale and also the Orange County seat of Santa Ana, whose central business district was declining in competition with postwar newcomers Long Beach, Anaheim, and Newport Beach. "To downtown property owners, businessmen and merchants, the expansion of the civic center may be a matter of life and death—of the downtown area," cried the *Santa Ana Register*.²³

Indeed, as economic urban renewal schemes, the chief actors often initially promoting these ostensibly public government centers were the private financial interests most closely concerned with downtown

declines, often organized through each city's chamber of commerce. Commercial real estate owners and developers were particularly active promoters of postwar government centers. They offered opinions, expertise, and plans arguing for new government complexes' central locations, like the Chicago Committee for Buildings Downtown's illustrated proposal for three federal skyscraper office slabs around a central plaza in the commercial Loop district, which presaged the Mies office's eventual complex.²⁴ As urban renewal districts, postwar American government centers were shot through from the outset with private financial concerns.

The siting of these government centers was almost always also a divisive decision contested between competing elite business interests. In Boston, Albany, Chicago, and Honolulu, serious alternatives were all offered for more spacious, cheaper, peripheral, alternative locations—in Hawaii, a picturesque mountain-foot beachfront distant from the city.²⁵ But in every instance established downtown business interests triumphed, convincing government officials to keep the new government centers, and their publicly financed economic stimulus and facilities, close to the traditional downtown locations of state functions and their businesses' private financial investments. In this, too, postwar America government centers seem distinct from contemporary global comparands, like the Chandigarh and Brasilia complexes, located far from established commercial downtowns and older government facilities.

Postwar American government centers thus illustrate the fantasy of the state as a distinctive realm produced solely by disinterested state agents. Further complicating the picture is the range of private citizens who were also engaged in creating postwar American government centers, by appearing on expert architectural advisory boards and other appointed committees and commissions. Practices of an expanded participatory democracy began to open up the channels of policy-making to new actors such as women and minorities as well. Black housing activist Ida Yarborough in Albany served on the State Commission on the Capital City.²⁶ In Honolulu, Citizens' Advisory Committee member Liliuokalani Kawananakoa Morris of royal Hawaiian descent gave voice to emerging national preservationist sentiment and local Hawaiian native elite opposition to the new State Capitol's potential dislocation of the old royal Iolani Palace and Barracks. "FIE! on the Downtown Businessmen," Morris declared in a letter to the Committee's chair, whose ambitions for the Capitol district threatened Hawaiian heritage.²⁷ Morris's advocacy succeeded: the Palace conserved, the Barracks relocated. The episode demonstrates the pattern of intra-elite contestations behind the production of postwar American government centers and illustrates the ways hegemony was maintained in the

production of an American government center through assimilation of ethnic minorities.

The Iolani Palace and Barracks preservation also represents one instance of conservationist sentiment influencing postwar government center urban design. In Boston and New Orleans respect for existing street patterns conditioned the overall planning. The retained curve of old Cambridge Street splayed open the arrangement of buildings around Boston City Hall Plaza. In New Orleans, the axis from distant, historic Elk Place engendered New Orleans City Hall's and plaza's awkward angle in relation to the immediate street grid and flanking new state buildings. These moments of contextualism in postwar American government center production distinguished them from regularized, unified arrangements of global comparands in Brazil and India, and aesthetically disfigured New Orleans and Boston government centers' urban design. The open spaces are irregularly articulated; the main buildings isolated, awkwardly sited to each other. The compromised urban design is unable to reconcile the unresolved tensions between modernist urban renewal and contingent local contextualism. At the same time, the splayed and open urban design arrangements produce more dynamic, diagonal, porous circulation relations to the surrounding commercial districts, spatially blurring the boundaries that supposedly distinguish government centers from the rest of society.

Locating new postwar American government complexes alongside or amid thickly built-up commercial centers also inevitably meant significant displacements, by governments' eminent domain authority, of existing buildings and people. Generally, the displaced were small businesses and landowners. The politics of postwar American government centers involved more than intra-elite contestations among business interests and with preservationists; it affected lower classes, too. In Albany and New Orleans, substantial working-class residential neighborhoods were demolished: nearly seven thousand residents displaced in Albany; a predominantly Black, eleven-block neighborhood obliterated in New Orleans. Celebrated the New Orleans mayor's office: "Slums End: Beautiful Civic Center to Replace Present Dilapidated

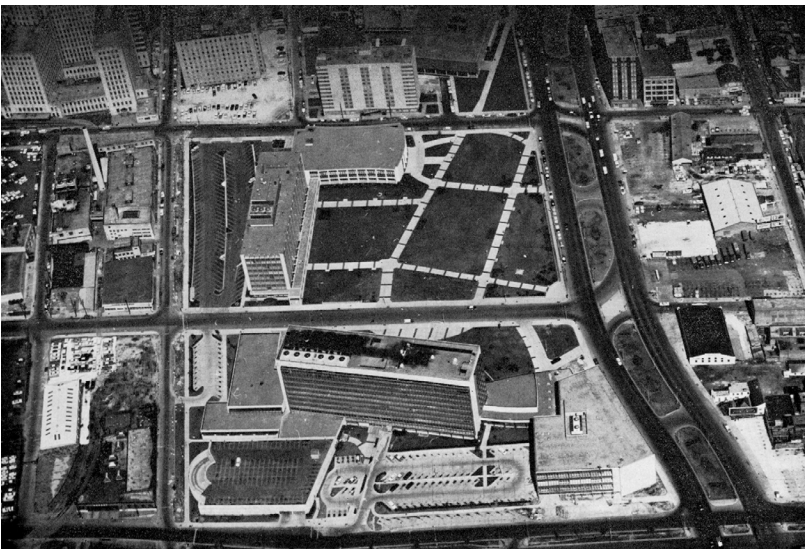
Below: Government Center, Boston, 1959–1971. I.M. Pei, The Architects Collaborative; Kallmann and McKinnell; P. Rudolph; Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbott. Source: Postcard collection, author.

Opposite: New Orleans Civic Center, 1951–1959. Goldstein, Parham and Labouisse; Favrot, Reed, Mathes and Bergman; A. Perez; Curtis and Davis. Credit: 1958 Annual Report, Office of the Mayor. City Archives and Special Collections, New Orleans Public Library.



Dwellings.”²⁸ Accommodating the administration of expanded social democracy—providing more benefits to more citizens—thus rested on the dispossession of citizens by undemocratic means without consent or recompense, a signal contradiction of the postwar American state evidenced in the architectural history of its government centers. The effect is laid bare, too, by the porous boundary between public and private interests. As we have seen, external economic agents and motivations were primary factors in originating and siting these complexes: The American state was hardly separate from the economy.

Another architectural dimension that both facilitated and complicated the postwar American government center’s ability to host collective fictions, as the material setting in which authority was performed, was the predilection for skyscrapers, present in nearly all our set (except the suburban and purely municipal Scottsdale, which lacks federal and state facilities). Once deemed anathema to government architecture because of their association with commerce, by the postwar period skyscrapers could be adopted as an architectural accoutrement of the postwar American state precisely because they embodied business-like efficiency.²⁹ Such efficiency was the ideological goal of the American administrative state as it grew to manage and deliver the expanding services of U.S. postwar welfare-warfare government. “Offices rather than monuments,” directed New Orleans administrator Brooke Duncan to the city’s civic center’s architects, who then constructed a pair of minimalist, curtain-wall slabs for city and state government.³⁰ Expertise and economy, professionalism and proficiency, rationality and objectivity—all were seen as antidotes to long-standing traditions of inefficiency, waste, patronage, and politicized public administration. Paradoxically, the turn to economy thus legitimated the expanding state. “Government is by far the biggest business in the country,” opined the *New York Times* in 1949.³¹ The valorization of business in the administrative state’s rise also represented the American postwar government’s internalization of antistatism, long embedded in American political culture, since the Constitution’s founding check-and-balance decentralization of concentrated authority. Its avatar was Ronald Reagan,



who declared in his first Inaugural Address, “Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”³² Modular standardization on nearly every gridded façade and many of the building’s open-plan, rearrangeable, interior office layouts, where bureaucrats worked and citizens met them, produced an architectural image of the American state’s business-like efficiency. The trio of steel-and-glass-frame structures at Mies’s Chicago Federal Center practically repeats the same firm’s purely commercial Toronto Dominion Center design. This conjunction of a corporate-like setting for public administration contradicted the traditional state effect—that of a distinction from private interest and enterprise.

The recourse to the architecture of business-like efficiency, as a novel means of achieving state effects, had other contradictions, too. Integration of multilevel state functions into concentrated government centers, which was used to justify consolidating government centers as an administrative efficiency measure, was deemed by one empirical study actually unnecessary from a bureaucratic productivity standpoint: Officials from different branches of government didn’t actually often need to meet face to face, a Chicago report determined.³³ Moreover, dis-coordination under federalism of architectural planning and patronage inevitably produced aesthetic disjunctions that undermined the state effect of a stably organized American system of governance. Such was the case in all the federated government centers of Boston, New Orleans, Santa Ana, and Honolulu, where municipal, county, state, and federal buildings were produced and designed more or less autonomously, scattered across the sites at different, uncoordinated angles, massings, heights, and elevations. In these compounded postwar American government centers, there is, moreover, little legible design distinction or spatial hierarchy among federal, state, and local buildings. The tallest buildings could be federal, county, or municipal in Boston, Santa Ana, and Honolulu, respectively, or overlooking low, focal, peristylar buildings that might be state or local in Honolulu and Boston, respectively. Order and coordination were absent. All was mixed together, with no sense of a nested, stable system. This was largely the political reality of American federalism’s checks and balances and divided polities, a constant jostling of power and sovereignty between levels and branches of government without permanent, clear boundaries and lines of authority.

Furthermore, the attempt to brand government as business-like in its management through the use of modular skyscrapers was not enough to legitimate the postwar U.S. state. “Efficiency is not a word from the public realm,” wrote political scientist Ralph C. Chandler. “It is a word from economics.”³⁴ Precisely as the postwar American welfare state

expanded its reach and administration, the leviathan for democratic legitimacy would have to appear more accountable to citizens than a corporation seeking its own financial profit. It would have to offer citizens a subjectivity beyond being the government's customers. In other words, it would have to deliver democracy not just efficiency, including in its architecture.

One way to render a sense of civicness and depart from the image of modular and business-like efficiency was to give the government center a certain monumentality or figuration. Boston City Hall, the Hawaii State Capitol, and the New York State Museum appear temple-like—peristylar columns and piers carry extended upper floors of rectangular masses—in Boston's case rendered in immutable-looking concrete. The adobe-like masses of Southwestern Scottsdale connote a regional identity. Cultural programming could also reinforce the message that government centers were sites of both elite and popular culture; the centers in our set frequently include libraries (Albany, Honolulu, New Orleans, Santa Ana, and Scottsdale), performing arts centers (Albany and Scottsdale), and ubiquitous permanent artworks. Albany's Empire State Plaza emphatically features, besides separate state museum and performing arts buildings, an extensive underground concourse of New York modern art donated by Rockefeller. Collective citizen identities have been activated, too, in the government centers' generous open spaces used for festivals, concerts, and other occasional events, in every instance. In comparison to commercial complexes, the percentage of unbuilt ground, for example, at the Chicago Federal Center far exceeded comparable private complex's plazas.³⁵ Downtown government centers as metropolitan fairgrounds could gather citizens across social divisions. Albany and Boston's plazas, especially, had been intensively used for regional events from the 1970s on, including winter carnivals and sports championship gatherings.

The open spaces and urban design of postwar American government centers also frequently encouraged citizens to engage in free, individualized movement and wander unguided across broad, unencumbered planes, as in the central plazas of Chicago, Boston, and Santa Ana. Pedestrianism in all the superblock sites complemented and compensated for the era's automobilism. Often, government center plazas were paved in imitation of European piazzas (Boston, especially); sometimes they were grassed on the Washington, DC mall model (Scottsdale, New Orleans, and Honolulu).

Orange County Civic Center, Santa Ana (California), begun 1955. Faulkner, Smith, Neutra, Eckbo, Blurock, and others. Photograph taken 1973. Courtesy of Orange County Archives.



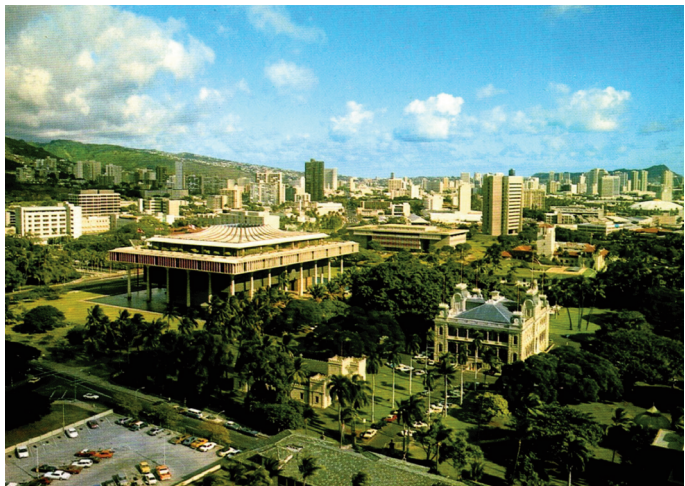
Postwar American government centers might thus activate collective fictions of individualized, liberated subjectivity for citizens. In the context of Cold War contests, one result of this spatial effect was to cast American government centers as antidotes to totalitarianism: By housing the administration of both expanded social democracy and the security state, these building complexes seemed conjoined bulwarks against communism.

Eventually, the unanticipated use of many of these open spaces for popular protest came to reinforce this state effect, as if government was providing spaces of political enablement for the uniquely American notion of free speech, at first in civil rights and antiwar rallies. Later, the centers served as sites for a staging of cultural identity politics, as in the re-created Japanese tea house that was erected by the local Nissei community in Santa Ana in 1970, prominently sited at the terminus of the complex's main east-west axis at the base of the high county courthouse. Postwar government centers hosted and steered a collective fiction, enacting an evolving theater of expanded American democratic citizenship.

The Cold War era individualization of movement—and the equation of this freedom of movement with democratic “inclusion”—was often meant to be extended into the buildings themselves. Boston City Hall's pillared base and interior circulation and public service areas were designed to be traversed unencumbered. The Hawaii State Capitol's central courtyard is unenclosed front and back, accessible at all times to passersby, open to the sky as well. The Chicago Federal Center's courthouse slab features a spacious, central lobby that can be passed through from front to back, in a civic gesture that contrasts with Mies's corporate towers, where elevator banks always occupy the core, for reasons of commercial efficiency and profit. Permeability features as a common architectural embodiment of postwar democracy, facilitating citizen accessibility—not just obedience to the state—and blurring spatially the boundaries between exterior public and interior private spaces. However, publicly accessible spaces within government centers were also mostly bureaucratic in their architectural address to citizens. Grand, expressive exteriors often led into disappointingly bare, institutional, interior corridors, service halls, and alienating bureaucratic counters.

In sum, the state effects of the American postwar government centers are not only the appearance of unity, stability, and distinction, but also draw on tropes of business-like efficiency, on the one hand, and participatory democracy,

Honolulu Capitol District and Civic Center, 1960–1973. John Carl Warnecke; Belt, Lemmon and Lo; and others. Source: <https://www.hippostcard.com/listing/hawaii-honolulu-aerial-view-state-capitol-building/33963439>, accessed June 19, 2025.



on the other, even as these effects obscure their creation in practices often conflictual and dis-coordinated, riven by contradiction. Private-financial and public-state interests crisscross in nascent neoliberal urban renewal schemes. Essentially *undivided* between private and public—in their capitalist financial origins, spatial permeability, and mixed business-civic expression—postwar American government centers might be compared with Klein bottles, that is, having no distinct boundaries between inside and outside, but rather topologically continuous.³⁶ The business-like administrative state internalized anti-statism and undermined democratic accountability. Fragmented federalism erodes unified state willfulness and architectural coherence. The rationalistic concentration of government offices was functionally unnecessary. The resultant overlarge, redeveloped superblocks smoothed surrounding traffic flows while offering interior plazas and parks as a compensatory pedestrianism to the accommodated automobile culture. Indelible memories remain of what urban renewal destroyed. In New Orleans a lost neighborhood has been digitally archived.³⁷

Postwar American government centers' monumental, modernist, illegible architectural abstraction has also alienated observers in spaces deemed barren wastelands emptied of commercial vitality, like Boston City Hall and Plaza.³⁸ The former has been called "the world's ugliest building."³⁹ Its intended expression of democratic governance—base permeable to citizens, sculpted midsection for elected politicians, modular bureaucracy above—is largely illegible. A popular myth ascribes its design instead to an upside-down Lincoln Memorial. Its Siena-inspired pedestrian plaza, even to its codesigner Henry Cobb, was experienced as "overscaled, underpopulated, coldly institutional, and obdurately resistant to the many efforts that have been made to bring it to life . . . promising so much more than it could deliver."⁴⁰

We might thus speak perhaps of some American government centers as *ineffective* state effects, which have not conjured consistent, legible settings for the American federated state's message of unity, rationality, boundedness, and stability, much less its efficiency and accountability, probity, and responsiveness. In this regard, the incoherence of postwar American government centers as "sites of political learning" may perhaps be part of the dynamic of Americans' decreasing trust in government. Sixty years ago, in the mid-1960s, 80 percent of Americans said they "trust the government to do what is right just about always/most of the time." From 2010 to 2024, only about 20 percent do.⁴¹ I return to Mettler's question, "How can government do so much, yet be so despised?"⁴² Her answer is that "visibility matters"—that Americans do not recognize "submerged" benefits like child tax credits as forms of welfare and so fail to perceive government's assistance.⁴³ If visibility

matters, in attitudes to government, then an architectural answer to Mettler's question may then be that the American state has been despised precisely because it constructed so much, in literally building up the administrative apparatus of the welfare-warfare state and visibly concentrating it in government centers in such a bureaucratic, inhumane, and architecturally illegible and often incoherent manner.

In response to this incoherence and illegibility, some postwar American government centers have been reformed through demolition and rebuilding. In California, for example, Long Beach's civic center was completely rebuilt in the 2010s, Orange County continues to undergo piecemeal replacement.⁴⁴ Boston's Government Center, alternatively, is being privatized in two senses: the Paul Rudolph-designed State Service Center is in 2025 being turned over to real estate capital for rehabilitation and profit; and City Hall Plaza has been reconfigured and domesticated from a broad, open, regional fairground into subdivided neighborhood park/event spaces, even with a children's playground.⁴⁵ The postwar government centers' surviving more or less intact are those with a coherent overall design from unitary patronage, as in Albany, Chicago, and Scottsdale, or an easily legible, popular symbolism, like the Hawaii State Capitol, whose "favorite features" in a 2019 poll were seen as "Architectural Metaphors for Hawaii" (a pools-surrounded island plus tree-like columns and volcano-like oculus) and a "Metaphor for Open Government and Democratic Ideals" (permeable peristyle and open-air courtyard).⁴⁶

American government architecture, its effects and fictions, still matter. Legible architectural state effects of distinctive authority remain desired in the current politics and culture centered on U.S. president Donald J. Trump. On January 6, 2021, an iconic structure of American central government, the United States Capitol, became the focus of a titanic electoral struggle with racial and class dimensions, white supremacists leavening the populist mob. A month earlier, the Trump administration, instigated by the National Civic Art Society, had taken aesthetic aim at modernist government architecture along similar cultural lines. An "Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture" derided postwar modernist federal buildings associated with the welfare state for being "not even visibly identifiable as civic buildings" plus "unpopular with Americans," based on National Civic Art Society polling data, and called for a return to "classical and traditional architecture" along the lines of European traditions.⁴⁷ A collective fiction of democracy would be rendered architecturally by styles triumphant in popular beauty contests, rather than representing progressive modernity as in the postwar era. Though rescinded by the Biden administration, on its very first day the second Trump administration revived the

“Promoting Beautiful Civic Architecture” mandate in a memorandum to the GSA calling for “recommendations to advance the policy that Federal buildings should be visually identifiable as civic buildings and respect regional, traditional, and classical architectural heritage.”⁴⁸

Even so, some of the contradictions of the state effect fueled by these postwar government centers, which are the core of this article, continue. Aspirations for a legibly traditionalist government architecture are ostensibly running up against the more heated campaign led by the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, to prioritize “cost-effective workplace solutions,” including by selling off redundant federal office buildings to private developers.⁴⁹ Efficiency goals thus cast doubts on the prospect that any new democratic, “Beautiful Civic Architecture” would be erected for a diminished federal workforce, much less be able to square the inherent contradictions between efficiency and civicness more successfully than modernist postwar government architecture.⁵⁰ And yet, under Trumpian neoliberalist shrinking of the state, the two campaigns—architectural anti-modernism and privatization—are arguably symbiotic. The former devalues postwar buildings, so making them more cheaply available for real estate capitalists’ ultimate profit in acquiring structures and lands. The present lives still within the dynamics of postwar American government center architecture and its state effects: contradictions between fictions of efficiency and democracy unresolved, boundaries between state and economy as porous as ever.

Notes

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1. Matthew A. Crenson and Francis E. Rourke, “By Way of Conclusion: American Bureaucracy since World War II,” in *The New American State: Bureaucracies and Policies since World War II*, ed. Louis Galambos (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 147–148. See also Anne M. Kornhauser, *Debating the American State: Liberal Anxieties and the New Liberalism, 1930–1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); and Ralph Clark Chandler, ed., *A Centennial History of the American Administrative State* (New York: The Free Press, 1987).

2. For one city’s instance of government rental properties, see Real Estate Research Corporation, “Analysis of Space Requirements and Locational Criteria for Governmental Functions in the Central Area of Chicago, Prepared for the Public Building Commission” (Chicago: Real Estate Research Corporation, 1957). On postwar federal office buildings, see Judith H. Robinson and Stephanie S. Foell, *Growth, Efficiency, and Modernism: GSA Buildings of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s* (Washington, DC: U.S. General Services Administration [GSA], 2003); Lois Craig and the staff of the Federal Architecture Project, *The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in United States Government Buildings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978), 540–543.

3. Other large postwar American government centers include ones in Long Beach (California), Grand Rapids (Michigan), Norfolk (Virginia), and Tallahassee (Florida).

4. Phyllis Lambert, “Mies Immersion,” in *Mies in America*, ed. Phyllis Lambert (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 192–521; Franz Schulze and Edward Windhorst, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, New and revised edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 342–347; Daniel Bluestone and Daniel M. Abramson, “Civic Business: Mies’s Chicago Federal Center in Context,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 2026 (forthcoming). Two archives of interest are the Records of the General Services Administration, Administrator’s General Subject File 1959–1961, National Archives and Record Center, College Park, Maryland and the Mies Van der Rohe Archive, Museum of Modern Art.

5. Carol Herselle Krinsky, “St. Petersburg-on-the-Hudson: The Albany Mall,” in *Art the Ape of Nature: Studies in Honor of H. W. Janson*, eds. Moshe Barasch, Lucy Freeman Sandler, and Patricia Egan (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981); Daniel M. Abramson, “Albany at the Crossroads of a Strategic Region,” in *The Region: Spatial Histories of a Naturalized Concept*, eds. Ayala Levin and Manuel Shvartzberg Carrió (Aggregate, <https://www.we-aggregate.org/>). Relevant archives include the Yale University Library, Manuscripts and Archives, Maurice Emil Henri Rotival papers and the New York State Archives, Office of General Services files and Temporary State Commission on the Capital City files.

6. Bennie Gonzalez, “Palm Desert and Civic Center,” 1982, in Box 1, Folder 7, Bennie Gonzales Collection, Design and the Arts Library Special Collections, Arizona State University; quoted in Heather N. McMahon, “Scottsdale Civic Center,” SAH Archipedia, eds. Gabrielle Esperdy and Karen Kingsley, Charlottesville: UVaP, 2012–present, <http://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/AZ-01-013-0080>. See also Civic Center Mall and Bennie Gonzalez vertical files, Scottsdale Heritage Collection, Scottsdale Public Library.

7. Daniel M. Abramson, “Representing the American Welfare State,” *Grey Room* 78

(Winter 2020): 96–123. Archives of particular value are: MIT Museum, TAC The Architects Collaborative Inc. Collection; Massachusetts State Archive, Government Center Commission files; Library of Congress, Paul M. Rudolph Collection.

8. Archives of particular value are: New Orleans Public Library, City Archives and Special Collections, Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison Records and New Orleans City Planning Commission Subject Files; Tulane University Libraries–Special Collections, Moise H. Goldstein Office Records.

9. Archives of particular value are: Orange County Archive, Planning and Development files and Civic Center Vertical files; Santa Ana Public Library, Santa Ana History Room; tBP/Architecture (Newport Beach) archives; University of California Irvine Libraries, James Sleeper Papers, Boxes 44 and 97; UCLA Library Special Collections, Richard and Dion Neutra Papers; University of California, Santa Barbara; Art, Design, & Architecture Museum, Architecture & Design Collection, Smith and Williams records, job nos. 977 and 1024.

10. Don J. Hibbard, *Democracy by Design: The Planning and Development of the Hawaii State Capitol* (Hawaii State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, 2019); Archival material of particular value can be found in the Hawai'i State Archives, Governors' papers and Department of Accounting and General Services Comptroller's files.

11. Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics." *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (1991): 91, 94, 81.

12. Bernardo Zacka, "Political Theory Rediscovered Public Administration," *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (2022): 35, 36, 37.

13. Suzanne Mettler, *The Government-Citizen Disconnect* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2018), 86.

14. Suzanne Mettler and Joe Soss, "The Consequences of Public Policy for Democratic Citizenship: Bridging Policy Studies and Mass Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 1 (2004): 62.

15. Mettler, 6.

16. Robinson and Foell, 48.

17. Robert Campbell, "City Hall Plaza to Have a Rebirth," *Boston Globe*, 12 May 1974, A-105.

18. Victoria Newhouse, *Wallace K. Harrison, Architect* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 251. See also note 5 above; Martin Filler, "Halicarnassus on the Hudson: The Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza, Albany, NY," *Progressive Architecture* 60 (1979): 106–109; Michael Sorkin, "Albany Malled," *Domus* 612 (1980): 23–25; and Joseph H. Boyd Jr. and Charles R. Holcomb, *Oreos and Dubonnet: Remembering Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012).

19. For Logue, see Lizabeth Cohen, *Saving America's Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), n.p. Seward Weber to Charles Mahoney, 22 April 1959, in Box 20, RG269, National Archives, Washington, DC. For Floete and the Chicago Federal Center, see Bluestone and Abramson.

20. Maynard W. Meyer to the Associated Planners, Notes from Work Session on 30 November 1961, 8 December 1961, in Box 79, Rotival Papers. In 1961, the year before Harrison and Abramowitz's appointment, Rotival devised a scheme at an alternate location of "'platforms' containing the parking and interspersed with retail shops and other service uses; with the governmental offices building up through the platforms and into the open at a top deck level roughly equivalent to the grade," which was eventually transposed to the built site.

21. See Bluestone and Abramson.
22. David A Crane, “The Federal Building in the Making of Boston’s Government Center: A Struggle for Sovereignty in Local Design Review,” *Federal Buildings in Context*, ed. J. Carter Brown (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 25. Adams, Howard, and Greeley “Government Center—Boston,” September, 1959. Kevin Lynch, as a designated consultant, had a major role in the 1959 Adams, Howard, and Greeley master plan that determined the eventual central layout of Boston’s Government Center main plaza and surrounding buildings.
23. McMahon, “Scottsdale Civic Center,” Society of Architectural Historians, <https://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/AZ-01-013-0080>, accessed 13 January 2025. Archie Shamblin, “Santa Ana’s Future at Stake?” *Santa Ana Register*, 30 August 1964, in vertical file, Santa Ana Civic Center vertical file, Santa Ana Public Library.
24. Committee for Government Buildings Downtown with Tibor J. Haring, “A Proposal to Retain the Governmental Function in Downtown Chicago,” 1957, f.3517b, Legislative File, Everett McKinley Dirksen Collection, The Dirksen Center, Pekin, Illinois.
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26. Temporary State Commission on the Capital City, *Albany/Plan for the Capital City [Report of the Commission and Report of the Planners]* (Albany: Temporary State Commission for the Capital City, 1963).
27. Liliuokalani Kawanakoa Morris to Aaron Levine, 4 June 1964, 450–5-9, Comptroller’s Files, Hawai‘i State Archives.
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29. See Bluestone and Abramson.
30. Memorandum—Municipal Center and City Hall conference, 4 January 1950, p. 4, file 431, New Orleans City Planning Commission Subject Files, New Orleans Public Library.
31. Quoted in Joanna Grisinger, *The Unwieldy American State: Administrative Politics since the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 182. “A Monumental Task Ends,” *New York Times*, Mar. 3, 1949, 24.
32. Ronald Reagan, Inaugural Address, 1981, quoted in Mettler, *Government-Citizen Disconnect*, 10–11.
33. Real Estate Research Corporation, “Analysis of Space Requirements and Locational Criteria for Governmental Functions in the Central Area of Chicago, Prepared for the Public Building Commission (Chicago, 1957), 2, 23. “Our research revealed no example of a high degree of face-to-face meetings of personnel at different levels of government.” “Civic pride,” “government prestige,” and “dramatic architectural accomplishment” might be gained but these were “only intangible benefits.”
34. Ralph Clark Chandler, “Epilogue,” in *Centennial History of the American Administrative State*, ed. Chandler (New York: Free Press, 1987), 579.
35. See Bluestone and Abramson.

36. Zeynep Çelik Alexander suggested the Klein bottle analogy.
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43. Mettler, 87.
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