

**CONCRETE DREAMS: ARCHITECTURE, POLITICS,  
AND BOSTON'S NEW CITY HALL**

(Order No.            )

**BRIAN M. SIRMAN**

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2014

Major Advisor: Keith N. Morgan, Professor of History of Art & Architecture

**ABSTRACT**

Although it has long been a controversial building, Boston's New City Hall sparked a revolution in both architecture and politics. Designed in 1962 by Gerhard Kallmann, Michael McKinnell, and Edward Knowles, the building boasts a distinctive design that responded to trends in European and American modernism, as well as the politics of 1960s Boston. During the past 50 years, the building has become widely reviled because of its architectural style and political symbolism. At the same time, it has influenced architecture and politics in its hometown, throughout the United States, and abroad.

While recent scholarship has explored discrete aspects of the building's design, no comprehensive history of New City Hall has previously been attempted. Moreover, the building's relationship to politics remains under-examined. This dissertation fills these voids by providing an interdisciplinary study of Boston's New City Hall. Using governmental and architectural archives, interviews, and a host of buildings worldwide as primary sources, I argue that the building's checkered architectural history is connected

to changing political, economic, and social conditions.

Chapter One surveys Boston's political and architectural history during the first half of the twentieth century, explaining how mid-century urban renewal efforts sought to end the corrupt politics and architectural sclerosis that had long afflicted the city.

Chapter Two explores Boston's unusual yet consequential method for selecting an architect for the project: an open, national architectural competition. This selection process led to an avant-garde design that reflected the progressive politics of the era.

Chapter Three analyzes the design from the competition stage through construction. It not only relates the building to the architects' distinctive philosophy of "Action

Architecture," but also situates it within the contexts of local politics and international architecture. Chapter Four delves into the long-standing controversy surrounding the

building, assessing the influence of changing political and architectural circumstances

and attitudes on the building's reputation during the past five decades. Finally, Chapter

Five investigates the building's local and global legacy and significance in terms of

political and architectural history. It concludes with a discussion of historic preservation

issues presented by unpopular buildings in general and New City Hall in particular.