

## Point of View: City Hall not just a place, but a statement

Guest editorial by John P. Klingman and Richard Campanella, published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, June 29, 2009

A City Hall reflects the aspirations of the citizenry. New Orleans history to date provides three clear examples. The future, however, is not so clear.

From colonial times into the mid-nineteenth century, New Orleans' City Hall was the Cabildo. Architecturally reflecting the city's Spanish heritage, this structure was specifically designed for city government, and was situated appropriately. It flanked St. Louis Cathedral, fronted the Place d'Arms (Jackson Square), and overlooked the great river. We treasure the Cabildo to this day.

As the city expanded upriver and became more culturally American, City Hall moved into a monumental Greek Revival edifice (1853). Designed by James Gallier Sr. specifically for its civic purpose, the new City Hall also fronted an urban park, Lafayette Square. Like the Cabildo, we treasure Gallier Hall to this day.

When the city expanded lakeward and embraced progressive governance in the mid-twentieth century, City Hall moved once again. This time a civic center was carved out of a poor, historic neighborhood, a loss that included the birthplace of Louis Armstrong. However, the plan exhibited bold vision and confidence in the city's future. A cluster of civic structures, including a nationally acclaimed public library, complemented the new urban space, Duncan Plaza. Designers thoughtfully oriented the new City Hall (1957) to face down the Loyola-Basin corridor toward the cultural complex centered around the Municipal Auditorium.

All three of our city halls were designed as iconic civic structures positioned to face important public urban spaces. They reflected visionary thinking.

Now we learn of plans to relocate City Hall into the former Chevron Place complex at the Gravier / O'Keefe intersection. Significant operational advantages are foreseen in the move, including the consolidation of office space, savings on rent paid for the Amoco Building, and other pragmatic factors. Expediency makes a formidable argument these days, amid Katrina recovery, a national recession, and limited budgets. Moving to the Gravier / O'Keefe location would also increase foot traffic and generate new commerce in that relatively quiet section of the CBD.

However, the promised financial savings are not guaranteed. Cost estimates, for example, are already rising, and gains in commerce for the Gravier / O'Keefe area would be offset by losses at the Poydras / Loyola area.

Retrofitting City Hall into a corporate office building speaks of no clear vision or plan. The nondescript Chevron building does not stand out in the skyline, nor from the street. It was not designed for city government, lacking even a chamber for public council meetings. It also lacks adjacent public outdoor space, which serves important ceremonial and civic purposes. Remember the March Against Crime in front of City Hall a few years ago? Where would citizens convene at the new location?

Everyone agrees our current City Hall needs a major renovation. Conceivably it could be joined with a new building on the site of the former State Office Building, breathing new life and vision into the Duncan Plaza complex while maintaining an iconic centrality.

A great city's seat of government plays a vital role in defining the persona of the place. City Hall is not only a building; it is a statement. Architectural quality, visual iconography, and a vital urban public presence must factor into the form City Hall takes.

These values are not trivial. They are important to this discourse because, if history is any guide, we will live with this decision for many decades to come.

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