



Corpus Christi City Hall, 1988, Taft Architects, architects. Palm-lined walk to the western façade, service entries on lower right.

Once clear of the dense petrochemopolis that lines the entry to central Corpus Christi, the cityscape was dominated last spring by two monumental outcroppings: the new City Hall and, in the distance across the Corpus Christi Bay, "Bullwinkle," the world's largest oil derrick. Bullwinkle, the equivalent of a 100-story building, was built horizontally, to be floated out and planted in the waters off the coast of Louisiana. Its tapered steel-framed structure resembled the carcass of a prone Hancock Tower. The sight of such a huge and inscrutable object – at once explicitly functional yet in its beached context totally mysterious – was thrilling. Alas, Bullwinkle was portable and as of July has left desolate flatness behind. The new City Hall, on the other hand, though slightly more cartoonish, was firmly planted on its site and, despite the city's well-established practice of frequently moving City Hall, will probably withstand changes in function and taste. Like a successful political candidate, it seeks high visibility without revealing its real values.

Designed by Taft Architects in association with Kipp, Richter & Associates of Corpus Christi, the new building and its surrounding parking lots occupy with cross-axial authority a four-block site. The generously landscaped parking areas that surround the building act as a *temenos*, setting off the six-story structure in its own geometrically controlled environment, where its foursquare bulk intimates a lost monumentality, once the prerogative of Texas's county courthouses. The much admired 19th-century courthouses of W.C. Dodson and James Riely Gordon, and such classical successors as Corpus Christi's former Nueces County Courthouse of 1914 by Gordon's protégé, Harvey L. Page, were always strictly symmetrical, pyramidally massed, and freestanding in ample courthouse squares. The symmetry of Taft's project is by comparison redounding, more fearless than "fearful," more like ectoplasm than a full-bodied reincarnation. It is the ghost of the Texas courthouse, wanting to appear monumental without being so.

Corpus Christi City Hall

The Ghost of the Texas Courthouse

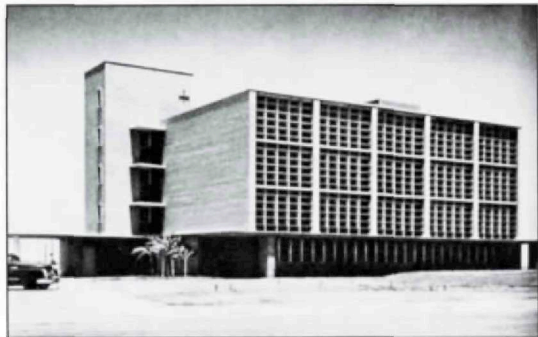
Richard Ingersoll



Ellis County Courthouse, Waxahachie, Texas, 1895, James Riely Gordon, architect.

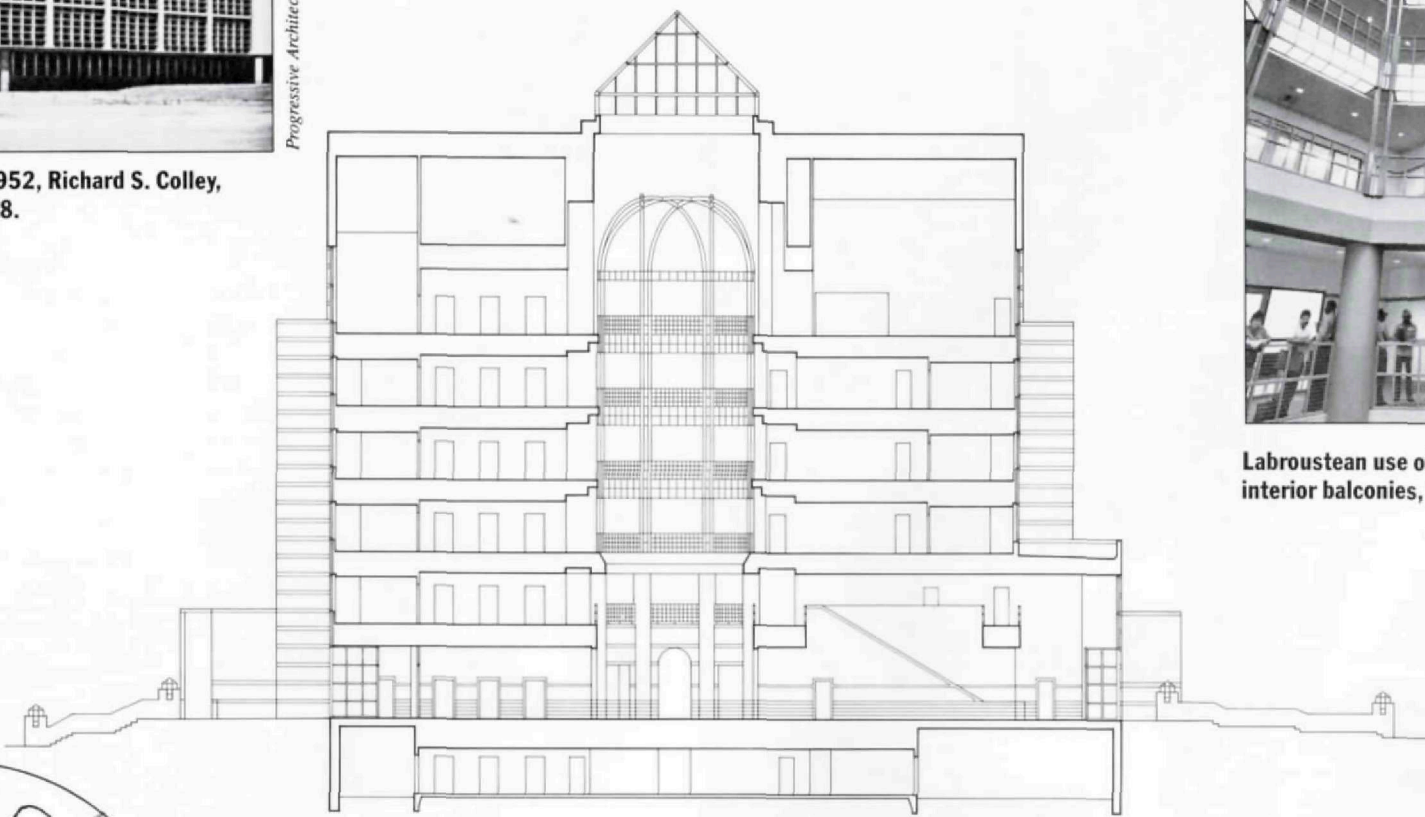
This stylistic paradox is a direct consequence of the political nature of the building. A quick survey of city halls built in the last 25 years (Boston, Dallas, San Bernardino, to mention a few) reveals the inverted pyramid as the desired civic icon – the City Hall for Tempe, Arizona is indeed a literal realization. As visual negations of hierarchy, such designs were assigned the latent role of contradicting monumentality. Since the early 1900s many American cities, including Corpus Christi, have transferred administration from corruptible elected officials to presumably less corruptible city managers. According to this scheme, policy is set by the City Council while the administration is run by paid professionals. This model was derived from the corporate structure of businesses, and indeed its spatial requirements are similar to the business office, meaning less representational space and more bureaucratic area.¹

In the new City Hall in Corpus Christi the city manager's office and its subsidiaries occupy the entire fifth floor, while the mayor has been given a relatively tiny suite on the ground floor. The program was not primarily concerned with creating a new symbol for the city but with consolidating the city administration. The previous City Hall, built by Richard S. Colley in 1952, was as modernist in its demeanor as Taft Architects's building is postmodernist. But it was lack of space in this building and an undesired location, not style, that led to its demise. City agencies were scattered in various locations, resulting in difficult interoffice communication and accountability. In 1983, the Houston firm of Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates was commissioned to design a new building for the same site as Colley's City Hall. After this design was presented, the city rejected the site. They then pursued the idea of a larger building, and after interviewing Caudill Rowlett Scott, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and Lloyd Jones Brewer & Associates, chose Taft on the strength of such projects as the Talbot House, the River Crest Country Club, and The Woodlands Water Treatment Office.



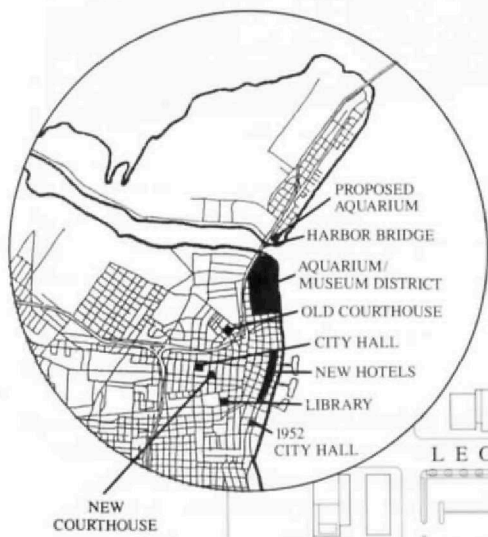
Progressive Architecture, February 1953

Corpus Christi City Hall, 1952, Richard S. Colley, architect; demolished 1988.

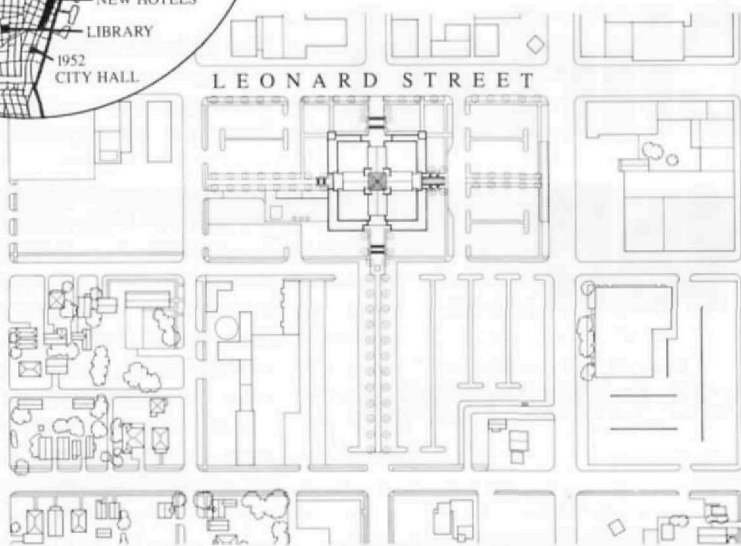


Labroustean use of metal members for the interior balconies, Corpus Christi City Hall.

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NEW COURTHOUSE



SITE PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

Legend: R — Reception, C — Council Chamber, M — Mayor's Office, P — Parks/Recreation, U — Public Utilities, T — Joint Tax Office and Central Cabinet

The decision to site the building away from the shore was part of a new city policy to reserve that area for tourism: two new high-rise hotels have recently been built and the Texas State Aquarium has been planned to join the Bayfront Arts and Science Park district that already includes Johnson/Burgee's Art Museum of South Texas, the Corpus Christi Museum, the Bayfront Plaza Convention Center, the Harbor Playhouse, and the newly completed Watergarden by Zion & Breen. The shoreline area of downtown is set off by a natural bluff that rises 20 feet from the "lower" to the "upper" city. Here there are a few mid-rise office buildings, the Nueces County Courthouse by Kipp & Winston, Smyth & Smyth, Bennett, Martin & Solka, and Wisznia & Peterson (1977) and the Corpus Christi Public Library by Morris Architects (1986). The new city hall actively affects these projects as part of a greater civic district. Its position at the intersection of Leopard and North Staples streets, the two busiest streets in this run-down part of town, recalls the ancient Roman practice of siting a forum with public buildings at the crossing of the city's *cardo* and *decumanus*. Proceeding from this classical precedent, a strong geometrical nucleus has been established that

organizes space, projecting outward to the future architecture of the area. The cross axes of the building's plan align with side streets on the north and south, allowing certain buildings, such as Richard S. Colley's Sacred Heart Church (1941), to be integrated into the overall matrix.

These grand planning moves are a mandate for monumentality. Yet although the precepts of axiality and symmetry have been faithfully obeyed, monumentality has been consistently muffled, not by inverting the pyramid, but through a process of trivialization. The exterior mass, for example, is a quartered cube. But this powerful figure has been undermined by the hollow vertical shafts at the center of each side and by the striated cladding, with bands placed at three-foot intervals. The glass cupola, which should rise independently above the center, is visually obscured by the pitched roofs of the wings and jutting shoulders of the plenum shafts at each corner. The pyramidal organization of the cube surmounted by a cupola is contradicted by the sequence of colors: the darkest — brown with blue banding — are placed at the top rather than at the bottom. Together these attributes tend to break things down into smaller pieces,

distracting attention from the whole. The structure seems more like an assembly of children's building blocks than a single corporeal mass.

The four façades are distinctly different, which again detracts from the singularity of the building as a monument. The north façade on Leopard Street is the most visible from the nearby freeway and has the clearest geometry: terraced steps with lanterns resembling the pointed cupola lead to the recessed entry, a shaft of green glazing running the height of the building. To countermand this verticality, a rounded volute-shaped pattern has been added to the cladding at its base, while a thick tympanum closes it at the top; it is further complicated by the horizontal pull of the freestanding walls that mask the handicapped access ramps on either side. The main entry on North Staples Street is preceded by a propylaeum of two detached porticoes serving as glorified bus shelters. From here, two rows of palms lead to a vaulted canopy similar to the bus shelters, and above this "CITY HALL" is blazoned in large Roman letters. The inscription is left dangling by the inset shaft of green glazing that is again terminated with a tympanum. The rondel in the tympanum was meant by the architects to carry a clock, but was

thought too prepossessing by the building committee. This episode exemplifies the counter-monumental strategies developed by Taft Architects and their clients: a place for a clock is made without including it.

The program called for a combination of office building for the administrative tasks and more accessible public spaces termed "a supermarket of public services." Though a longitudinal scheme might have better served these latter functions, it was decided that a single columnar volume was more energy efficient. The four entries lead to a central octagonal well, 30 feet in diameter, open to the entire six floors. Much like Labrouste's Ste. Geneviève Library, the internal framing is made of thin steel members that allow light to radiate freely and facilitate visual communication between floors. The well is terminated by a false dome of crossing members that form a pattern reminiscent of the stellated designs in Guarini's strapwork domes. The crossing is paved with illusionistic tiles by the Corpus Christi ceramicist William Wilhelm, whose kitsch subverts any possible monumental experience of the octagon. One of the four niches of the octagon is cleverly occupied by the information



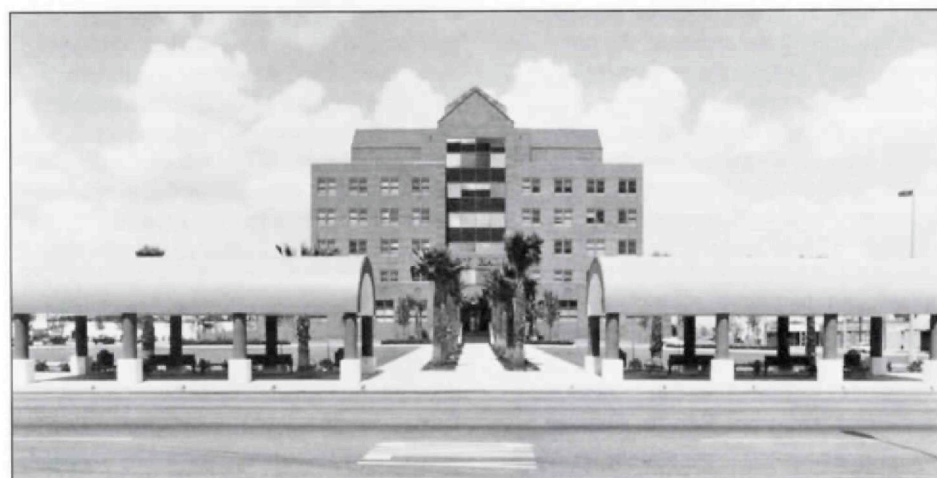
Trompe l'oeil tile floor by William Wilhelmi; an information booth occupies one of the four niches of the octagonal atrium, Corpus Christi City Hall.



The council chamber with suspended grid ceiling mimicking coffers, Corpus Christi City Hall.



East lobby serving council chamber and mayor's office, Corpus Christi City Hall.



Principal facade with portico bus shelters, Corpus Christi City Hall.



THIRD FLOOR PLAN

desk, across from it is a rounded niche and two squared niches that beg to be filled with sculpture. The color palette of burnt sienna, olive green, and cream is soothing and the general atmosphere is unthreatening and easy to use. But it is never grand: the lost luxury of paneled walls and marble halls known to public buildings of a bygone era have been parodied by streamlined wooden battens that run the length of the public corridors. The west lobby is lined with counters for public utilities and tax queries; the south lobby has escalators to the second floor; the north lobby has elevator banks; and the east lobby has comfortable lounge furniture, serving both the mayor's office and the Council Chamber. The Council Chamber seats 150 and is the most thoroughly appointed of the interiors: a suspended grid artfully mimics the effect of a coffered ceiling. The office floors are less cramped than one might suspect from examining the plans. The client rejected the idea of an open office plan, but agreed to spaces divided by half walls and to cells without doors which loosen the layout considerably. There are frequent openings and social spaces in the tightly packed corridors, and very few work spaces are far from natural light. The only internal spaces that seem particularly unresolved are the social

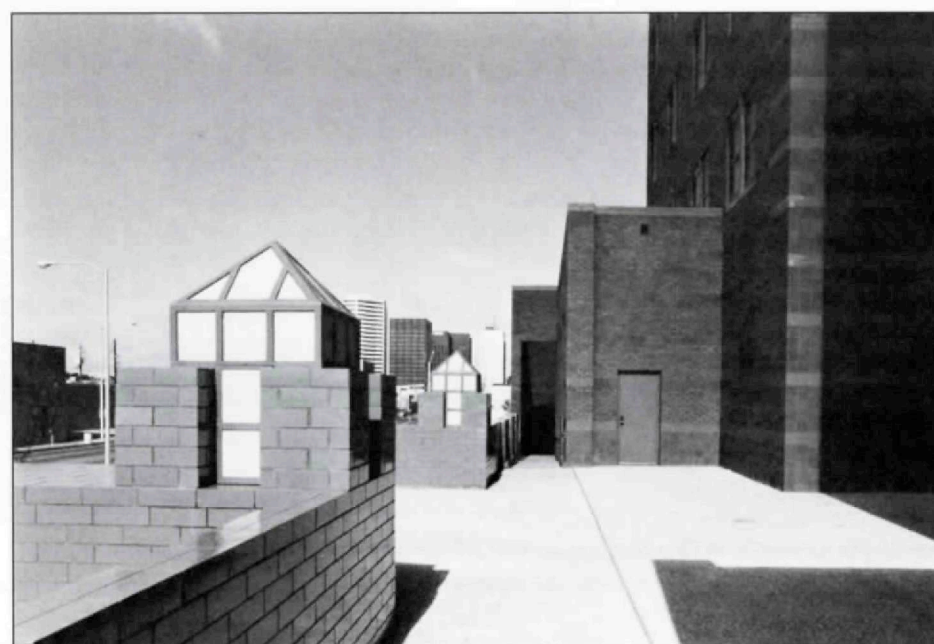
spaces on the sixth floor, where the ceiling is disproportionately high, giving the effect of leftover space.

Although the classical presuppositions of Taft Architects's *parti* have led to a series of retractions, one feature has emerged as a truly noble statement: the parking lots. They are "parked" parking lots, with numerous planted strips and tree-lined paved walks, offering shade and visual relief to what is usually merciless asphalt. Taft Architects have proven that a parking lot can be a delightful garden.

The construction and completion of the new City Hall coincided with the demolition of both the 1912 City Hall and its 1952 successor. The former building served as a public library until the completion of the new library in 1986. Colley's 1952 City Hall was one of the best period pieces of Texas modernism by the unsung hero of that movement and the subject of a cover story in *Progressive Architecture* in February 1953. It was praised for its sensitive response to site, program, and climate and the part it played in the plan for the now gutted Civic Center. Its ice-cube-tray sun screens were inspired inventions, as were the undulating wood paneled walls of the Council Chamber. Its demolition by city



North façade, Corpus Christi City Hall.



North facade porch; handicap ramps at either side, Corpus Christi City Hall. Lanterns recall the prismatic cupola above the atrium.

government was criminal.

In a letter to the mayor and council members advocating preservation of Colley's building, historian Stephen Fox commended the city for its architectural patronage of the new City Hall but feared "the possibility that in a mere 36 years preservationists may again have to plead that this extraordinary building [Taft's project] not be destroyed just because it seems old, ugly, and disposable."

Since the opening of the new City Hall righteous Corpus Christians have written numerous complaints to the local newspaper, some attacking it for its pomposity, others for its corporate anonymity. This lack of consensus as to interpretation is a good test of the building's desired effect. The ghostly

strategy for an unmonumental monument has not produced a work of proleptic originality, such as Colley's City Hall, nor a work of eccentric beauty, such as Dodson's and Reily's courthouses, but one that may ultimately prove to be the most politically resilient. ■

Notes

- 1 William L. Lebovich, *America's City Halls*, Washington, D.C.: Preservation Press, 1984.

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