

1. Houston's second city hall (1872). One of Texas' grandest buildings, constructed during the Reconstruction administration of T.H. Scanlan.



2. Houston's third city hall (1876). Basically a more sophisticated version of the 1892 structure.

## A Legacy of City Halls for Houston

## Barrie Scardino

The offices of Houston's mayor and city council have not always been located in the building facing Hermann Square that we know today as City Hall. It is the most recent in a series of buildings and schemes designed in fashionable styles by well-known architects. From temporary headquarters in a saloon to the first, modest frame building and subsequent variations of Victorian architecture, Houston city halls evolved to the moderne style structure still functioning as the seat of our municipal government. This essay and its accompanying photographs trace the architectural development of Houston city halls.

All Houston city halls before the present one were located in Market Square, a full block site bounded by Preston and Congress Avenues and Travis and Milam Streets. This block (#34) was laid out on the original 1836 map of Houston as Congress Square where the capitol of the Republic of Texas was to have been located. Only a year later maps show block 34 as Market Square, which for almost one hundred years was the center of commercial and public life in Houston. Here in 1840 Thomas Stansbury & Sons received a contract to construct a rectangular-shaped, one-story frame building facing Travis Street to house market stalls from which farmers, hunters, fisherman and merchants sold their goods. This building had a dirt aisle through its center and permanent canopies supported by simple wood posts. Before it was even finished, the city fathers, who had been meeting in Kessler's arcade, a saloon one-half block away on Travis Street, decided to construct a city hall adjacent to the market house. A two-story wood frame building with a pitched roof was completed in November of 1841. This first city hall, which served for thirty years, was grand only in its size for it was much like the houses and commercial buildings around it, only larger. In 1860 a clock tower was added rising from the center of its pitched roof, imparting to it some distinctiveness associated with municipal facilities at that time.

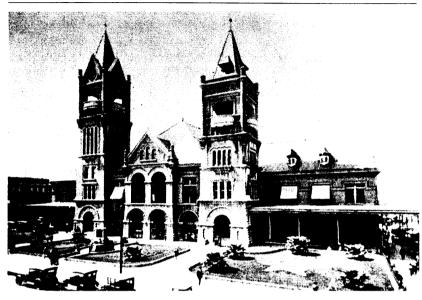
Immediately following the Civil War, city officials began plans for a new

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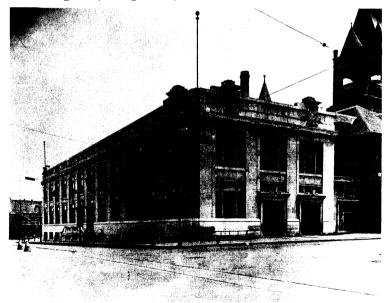
city hall, but no definite action was taken until 1871 when Mayor T. H. Scanlan completed a tour of several American cities to survey existing city hall designs. Although an ironclad building was proposed as a first choice, Scanlan recommended, for reasons of economy, a brick edifice. Begun in 1872, plans were altered several times during construction. When completed, the new city hall and market house contained not only the essentials for a marketplace and government offices, but a 1,000 seat theatre decorated with fluted columns, crystal chandeliers and other amenities which were considered at that time to be extravagances. The three-story brick building was designed in a Victorian, Italianate style with arched windows, hood moldings and doors, bracketed and denticulated cornices, and twin six-story towers, which housed a fire bell and clock (see fig. 1). The ironclad building which was rejected as too expensive might have cost as much as \$300,000, but the new city hall when it opened in June 1873 was one of the most elaborately appointed buildings in Texas at a cost to the city of over \$400,000. The glory of the new building was short-lived, however. On July 8, 1876, a crowd estimated at 20,000 watched this controversial structure burn to the ground. A suspicious fire which started on the stage of the theatre had spread too rapidly to control.

Under Mayor I.C. Lord an architectural competition for a new city hall design was won by Galveston architect Edward J. Duhamel. Construction began in October of 1876 over the foundations of the destroyed building. This new city hall, while larger than its predecessors was built by contractors Britton & Long for only \$100,000, adding credence to the outrage of many who considered the 1872 building a wasteful extravagance. Duhamel's city hall in form and style was basically a more sophisticated version of the 1872 structure (see fig. 2), but did not have its predecessor's interior elegance. The three-story central block, 100 by 125 feet, again featured two corner towers, but these were asymmetrical, one taller than the other. The one-story market wings of the 1872 building became two-story blocks. The Italianate detailing, crested roof and chimneys remained while subtle changes such as the shape of the arched apertures gave the newer city hall a distinctive appearance. Just after a remodeling project was begun in February 1901, in June Duhamel's city hall was also destroyed by fire when the city's outdated water system could not provide sufficient pressure for enough water to extinguish the flames.

By August of 1901, F.S. Glover and Son of Houston had submitted plans for a new building in Market Square. Although these plans for a \$100,000 structure were approved, it appears that bids came in at \$250,000. It took until the next July to arrange financing when a \$200,000 city bond issue was approved, but by then there were other questions about Glover's plan. Finally, in November of 1902, George E. Dickey, an accomplished Houston architect, was awarded a contract to prepare what would become the final design for Houston's fourth city hall. This ambitious stone and brick building was not



3. Houston's fourth city hall (1904). An elegant, Victorian Romanesque building designed by George Dickey after the Victorian era was over.



4. The neoclassical city hall annex (1913) which was not architecturally compatible with the Victorian style 1904 city hall. Cecil Thomson Collection, San Jacinto Museum of History Association.

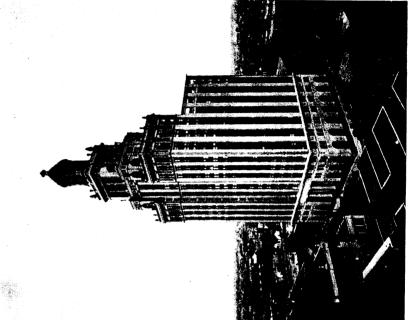
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completed until early in 1904 (see fig. 3). Dickey's elegant design incorporated two towers for the clock and bell as earlier buildings had done, but its stylistic details were in the Victorian Romanesque mode which had been popular on the east coast in the 1880s and 1890s. Stylistically outdated, this building was constructed in an era which had begun to reject Victorian asymmetry and eclecticism in favor of the more formal neoclassicism. In 1914 the cornerstone was laid for a two-story city hall annex across the rear of Dickey's building extending all the way to the sidewalk on Milam. Designed by Sanguinet, Staats and Gottlieb and city architect Maurice J. Sullivan, this neoclassical structure was not stylistically compatible with the 1904 building (see fig. 4).

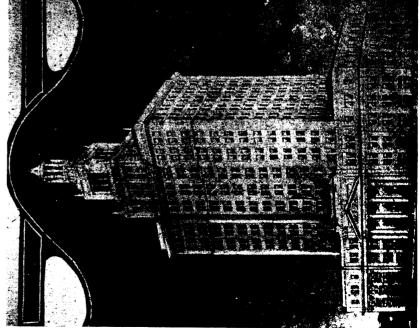
The annex housed the principal city offices and was often referred to as "city hall." Dickey's building survived intact until 1948 when the leaking, unstable towers were removed. At that time Houston lost its old bell, cast in 1875, which had rung fire alarms and tolled the city's nine o'clock curfew. The 1904 city hall and its annex ceased to house the government in 1939 when the offices were for the first time moved from Market Square to the new and current City Hall, located in the Civic Center.

Fifteen years of planning interrupted by controversy and by the Great Depression preceded the construction of the 1939 City Hall. During the first term of Mayor Oscar Holcombe (1921-1923), a nineteen-story structure was proposed to replace the 1904 building on the Market Square site. Designed by C.D. Hill & Company this was to have been a neoclassical skyscraper with setbacks culminating in a choragic monument at its apex (see fig. 5). A rendering of this building was published in 1923, one year before plans were begun by John Eberson of New York for Houston's famous Niels Esperson Building which was completed in 1927 (see fig. 6). The striking resemblance between these two designs is remarkable although this particular architectural form was not completely without precedent. Chicago, New York and New Orleans all had such buildings completed before 1923. The Municipal Building in New York designed by McKim, Mead and White in 1914, although different in its massing, was also topped with such a monument and might have inspired the C.D. Hill proposal for a municipal building here.

The reason that the 1923 C.D. Hill scheme was not long considered was that a movement was initiated shortly thereafter to locate the new city hall not in Market Square but on a site near Buffalo Bayou, just west of the business district. This location, across from Sam Houston Park and the public library, faced Hermann Square, a park willed to the city by George Hermann (1843-1914). Arthur Coleman Comey had suggested in a planning report prepared in 1913 that a civic center be established in that general area. But it was not until plans for a new city hall were underway in 1923 that this suggestion, which was taken up by Holcombe and the newly appointed city planning commission, directed that a plan for such a center with Hermann Square as a nucleus be prepared. Hare & Hare, landscape architects and city planners from Kansas City who had served as counsultants on other Houston projects, were hired to



6. Niels Esperson Building, 1924-1927, still an important architectural landmark in downtown Houston.



5. City hall proposed for market square site (192

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produce a civic center proposal. The first sketch prepared showed the Houston Public Library and another six government buildings all in the classical style and all facing Hermann Square. The city hall design (see fig 7) was modeled on the United States Capitol. It was to have been a three-story, I-shaped building with a central pedimented portico and dome.

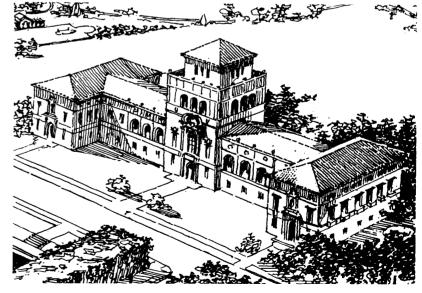
A second scheme by Hare & Hare was studied more seriously than the first by the city planning commission. This showed all five proposed buildings in the Spanish Renaissance Revival style to blend with the library designed by Cram & Ferguson of Boston in 1922-23 and then under construction (see fig. 8). In this plan, the site of city hall was moved across Bagby and placed in Sam Houston Park, facing Hermann Square (which would have been lengthened by one block to include the site on which City Hall was finally built). Houston voters approved a bond issue for the new city hall and civic center in 1927. In 1928 the city planning commission, chaired by Will C. Hogg, formally proposed that the second Hare & Hare scheme be adopted. James Ruskin Bailey, Alfred C. Finn and Hedrick & Gottlieb were commissioned to design the new building for the city.

In 1929 the architects' proposal was presented, but instead of the expected Spanish Renaissance styling, the building was a twenty-story skyscraper, modeled on the recently erected Los Angeles City Hall (1926-1928), which was based in turn on the Nebraska State Capitol designed by Bertram Goodhue, a former partner of the Houston Public Library architects Cram and Ferguson (see fig. 9). This apparent conflict was resolved by the Great Depression. Walter E. Monteith replaced Oscar Holcombe as mayor in 1929 to find that the bond monies of 1928 were insufficient to build the skyscraper city hall. The onset of the Depression made future bond issues unlikely, but Mayor Oscar Holcombe's enthusiasm for a new city hall kept the project alive. During his next term from 1933 to 1937, the city received the assurance of a Public Works Administration grant of \$818,811, one-half of the estimated construction cost. Dissension immediately erupted over the siting. The choice was between the block just west of Hermann Square (owned by the city) and the block just west of that. The city planning commission under the leadership of Hogg's protege, Hugh Potter, insisted that the earlier Hare & Hare plan already adopted by the commission be retained. The city council, under a new mayor, R. H. Fonville, favored the block west of Hermann Square as it was disinclined to purchase additional property. The city council prevailed. In this action on October 21, 1937, the council also appointed a new architect, Joseph Finger, over the objections of the mayor who felt the city still had an obligation to the architects who had been hired in 1929.

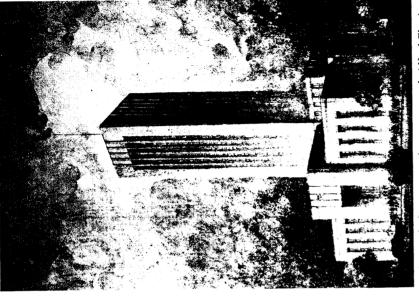
Fonville's objections were even more vociferous when Finger presented his "ultra-modernistic" plan. Fonville and Finger argued before city council where the mayor made a strong plea in favor of keeping the original notion of harmonizing architectural styles which would demand that the city hall be



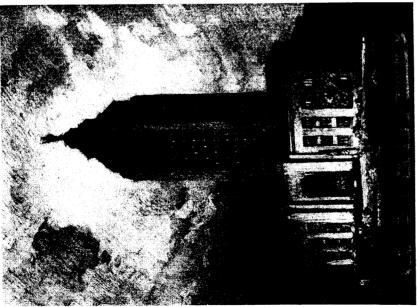
7. Proposed city hall (ca. 1925), based on the U.S. Capitol in Washington, would have occupied two blocks where the new Central Library and current City Hall now stand.



8. Proposed city hall (ca. 1927), was part of a second scheme for the civic center with all buildings in the Spanish Renaissance Revival style to match the public library.



10. Harris County courthouse proposal. Alfred Finn's streamlined version of his earlier city hall proposal.



9. Modern skyscraper proposed for city hall (1929), never built when funds became insufficient during the Depression.

built in the Spanish Renaissance style. Finger countered: "We're building for the masses and not the classes." In a fervent, nationalistic boast which eventually won over city council, Finger also said: "Here in America we are rapidly developing our own type of architecture, which is far above that of foreign countries." No design modifications were made in Finger's proposal which were adopted October 26, 1937 (see fig. 11).

Finger's design which caused so much controversy was inspired by another building — the county courthouse in Racine, Wisconsin designed by Chicago architects Holabird & Root. As the current City Hall was under construction in 1938, Hare & Hare redesigned old Hermann Square as a reduced version of the 1925 scheme.

After World War II it was proposed that a new Harris County courthouse be constructed in the Civic Center across from the new City Hall. Among several architects who presented schemes were the firms of Joseph Finger and Alfred C. Finn. Although a new courthouse was not built, Finger's design, his last before his death, displayed a remarkable likeness to the City Hall. Ironically, this was also the case with Alfred Finn's proposal (see fig. 10). His courthouse was obviously a reworked and architecturally updated version of his city hall design of 1929 (see fig. 9), intended to blend with Finger's City Hall.

The Houston City Hall of 1939 has survived the vicissitudes of taste. It won architectural awards when it was first completed, but a few years ago general opinion would have held that it was one of Houston's ugliest buildings. Its blocky, moderne style was characteristic of public architecture of the late 1930s, especially that associated with the Public Works Administration. Its fossilated limestone facade, fine aluminum grillwork and sculptural detail are all distinguishing elements we have come again to admire. The evolution in design and form of Houston's five city halls reflects the architectural changes through the years, but perhaps more importantly the economic and political shifts in Houston's history.