



Boston City Hall, USA 1968
*Gerhard Kallmann
 & Michael McKinnell*

When the design for Boston City Hall was unveiled in 1962, someone in attendance was heard to say, “What the hell is that?” From its inception, the building, designed by Gerhard Kallmann and Michael McKinnell, has divided opinion. “It’s the premier example of brutalist architecture in North America,” says Patrick Brophy, Boston’s former chief of operations, who was responsible for managing construction and infrastructure projects in Massachusetts’ capital city for more than 25 years. “There are people who hate it and people who love it. I really like it.”

His affection for the building doesn’t extend to City Hall Plaza, the “windswept brick tundra of nothingness” that surrounds the structure. Happily, an extensive renovation is planned that will introduce features including a playground, accessible pathways and a public art space. “These interventions bring the plaza back down to a human scale, creating a more welcoming and inviting place,” says Brophy.

The refurbishment is part of an atmosphere of broader change in Boston. In 2021 the city elected Michelle Wu, a 36-year-old lawyer, as its new mayor. Wu’s platform, which includes the introduction of fare-free bus services and divestment from the fossil-fuel industry, will make Boston one of the most progressive large cities in the US.

Of course, even the most thoughtful renovation won’t win over all of City Hall’s detractors. Brophy doesn’t mind. “I’ve heard many times that it’s a hideous building,” he says. “But it’s ours. It’s unique to Boston and it serves its people.” — HRS

1. Boston’s brutalist landmark
2. Council Chamber

PHOTOGRAPHER: Cody O’Laughlin