



This paper provides a short history of the construction of Philadelphia's City Hall and documents my thoughts as I visited City Hall a few weeks ago. While describing my visit, I will be looking for opportunities to compare and contrast features found at City Hall with those of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, Italy. I will base my comparisons on research and my personal experience of visiting both buildings.

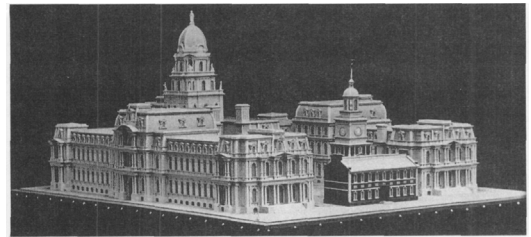
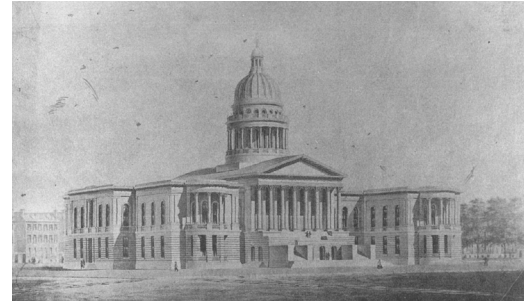
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HISTORY OF CITY HALL

The planning of City Hall first began around 1868 with a commission authorized to locate sites for municipal buildings. There were three potential sites, Independence Square, Washington Square, and Penn Square. Independence Square, the location of Independence Hall was initially selected as the site and by 1870 they were ready to begin construction. Architect John McArthur, Jr., who would eventually build the present-day structure, presented sketches and models for this site including two Neoclassic designs and one Second Empire concept. Independence Square was very unpopular with the citizens from the beginning, and the opposition became more intense, eventually leading to a law being passed to protect the site. The two alternate locations considered were Washington Square and Penn Square but the decision this time would be left to a ballot question in the October 1870 election. Voters selected Penn Square and the city began the process of determining a plan for this location, a green space in the center of the city. Although there was consideration of constructing four separate buildings at the corners of the intersections around Penn Square, in 1872 a plan was approved to erect one building at the heart of the square.

John McArthur, Jr. was elected architect of the project, he would die before its completion, and John Ord would succeed him. John McArthur, Jr. was born in Scotland and moved to Philadelphia at the age of ten to live with his uncle, who was a master builder. He was apprenticed to a house carpenter and attended classes at the Carpenter's Company, an architectural school/guild located in Carpenter's Hall. At the school, he learned from notable architects such as William Johnston, designer of the Jayne Building, Philadelphia's first "skyscraper" and G. Parker Cummings who designed the State Capitol Building at Sacramento. He also attended lectures by Thomas Ustick Walter architect of the United States Capitol Building who would help McArthur with the City Hall project. McArthur worked in the Italianate style for numerous projects including the Continental Hotel, the Girard House Hotel, and La Pierre Hotel all located in Philadelphia. McArthur was also an early adopter of the French Second Empire style, using the Mansard Roof on buildings such as the Public Ledger Building in Philadelphia and Pardee Hall at Lafayette College (although not entirely in the Second Empire style). With the design of City Hall, we get to see his French Second Empire masterpiece, a massive load-bearing structure build with granite, sandstone, and 88 million bricks faced with white marble.



Concepts for the Independence Square site.



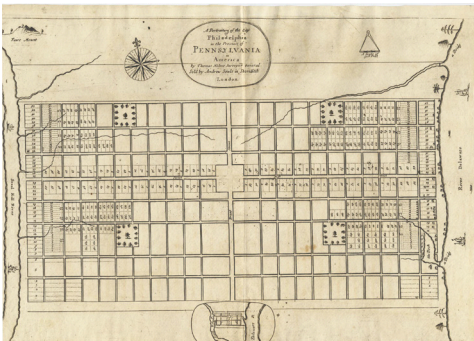
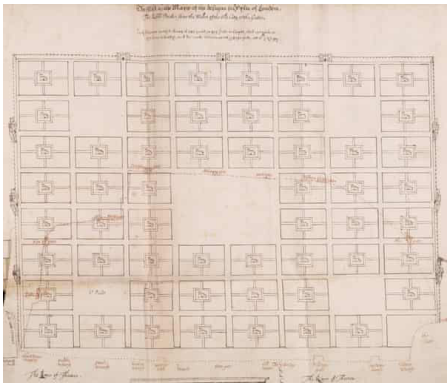
Public Ledger Building, Philadelphia (demolished).

ORGANIZED PLAN

William Penn was twenty during the Great Fire of London and witnessed first-hand how the unorganized congestion of cities can be dangerous. Possibly the design for Philadelphia was derived from Richard Newcourt’s concept for the post-fire redesign of London. Like Philadelphia, Newcourt’s design was based on a highly organized grid system with public squares at the center and in each quadrant. By building in Penn Square, City Hall now falls in the center of this grid, located halfway between the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers and convenient from all parts of the city. Groundbreaking was in 1871 with the tower corner-stone ceremony on July 4th, 1874 attended by the Mayor, the Governor, and President Ulysses S. Grant. The project was complete in 1894 with raising—by steam engine—and assembling the 37-foot tall bronze sculpture of William Penn by Alexander Milne Calder. It was the tallest structure in the world at its time of completion; Turner’s Guide provided a list of comparable structures (see image).

VISITING THE SITE

My visit to City Hall began at Love Park, which provides an excellent view of the building from an offset angle. Palazzo Vecchio’s preferred viewing angle was offset at a 45-degree angle, best viewed entering the Piazza Della Signoria by way of Via dei Calzaiuoli. Geometrically ordered ideal perspectives were important for builders of the late Gothic period, and Palazzo Vecchio’s is one of the most highly developed models. City Hall is beautifully framed from either side of Broad Street by its more modern neighbors and I believe the North façade from Broad Street is the preferred angle. Constructed in the center axis of four streets it is designed to allow pedestrians to pass through, but the location does create vehicle traffic issues. City hall has four façades, each façade at City Hall presenting a different theme. Many works of art and statues of prominent people line the areas around City Hall; this space acts as an open-air museum, similar to the Piazza della Signoria at Palazzo Vecchio, only the art is nowhere near as monumental. I stopped in the plaza across from the north façade, next to a controversial statue of former Mayor Frank Rizzo and a few pieces of “plop” art, as the Alexandra Lange article referred to this type of art. The art in this plaza consists of a few game pieces and abstract sculptures, closer to the entrance portal, there are two Civil War equestrian statues. From the plaza you get a better sense of the massive scale of City Hall, the large modern buildings that neighbor City Hall make it hard to notice its size. Many years ago, when I visited



Newcourt’s plan for London (top) and Philadelphia City Plan (bottom).

Comparative Heights	
OF THE	
PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS IN THE WORLD.	
City Hall, Philadelphia	547 ft.
Cologne Cathedral	510 "
Great Pyramid	485 "
Strasbourg Cathedral	478 "
St. Peter's, Rome	448 "
St. Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna	441 "
Salisbury Cathedral	404 "
Torricio of Cremona	396 "
Friburg Cathedral	385 "
Amiens Cathedral	383 "
Church of St. Peter, Hamburg	380 "
The Cathedral, Florence	376 "
Hotel de Ville, Brussels	374 "
Torre Asinelli, Bologna	370 "
St. Paul's, London	360 "
Church of St. Isaac, St. Petersburg	336 "
Cathedral, Frankfurt-on-Main	326 "
Bell Tower, St. Mark's, Venice	223 "
Hotel des Invalides, Paris	310 "
U. S. Capitol, Washington	287 "
Masonic Temple, Philadelphia	230 "

Turner’s Guide List of Comparative Heights.



City Hall from North Broad Street

Florence for the first time and turned the corner into Piazza Del Duomo, the massiveness of the Duomo was breathtaking. While City Hall is a large building, the modern architecture steals some of its power. I can only imagine how enormous this building seemed to people seeing it in the late 19th century with a proper scale to its surroundings. The “new” city hall was not well received when completed, the colossal “pile” or “marble monster” became an unwelcome symbol of state power and the corruption involved in its construction. Also, the ornate Second Empire style was no longer in favor. It would take many years for the city to truly appreciate this building.

Crossing the street closer to the façade, I can recognize the similarity of this building to the French palaces featured in our text especially the new Louvre façade. City Hall features elements of the five-part system placing an emphasis on the entrance pavilion, with two set back wings and end pavilions. McArthur divided the façade into five levels, including the Mansard roof with dormer windows. The façade also features many paired columns, commonly used in Second Empire architecture. What strengthens the four façades is Alexander Milne Calder’s monumental sculpture program, their powerful concepts, and incredible detail; he completed over 250 sculptures for City Hall. Above the north entrance portal, you find a keystone with a portrait of William Penn, on each side, are spandrels representing the Progress of America through sculptures of a Native American and a Pioneer. The spandrels in the corners of the central window feature sculptures representing Poetry and Architecture. At each corner of the third level, sculptures representing Fame and Victory. A characteristic feature of each of the four façades is the large Philadelphia Coat of Arms located above a set of three centralized windows of the third level. The central dormer window features a pediment supported by a Northman and Northwoman supposedly representing people of the North and early Swedish pioneers. Resting on the pediment are sculptures of reclining Puritans. The façade of Palazzo Vecchio features brown rusticated stone and presents as a fortress, like a castle with battlements. There is hardly any adornment on the exterior, such a contrast from this highly decorative French Second Empire façade in Philadelphia.

Without going into exhaustive detail, the four entrance blocks have the same structural design, but each has a unique sculptural theme. The South Entrance to the courts features Law and Justice. The keystone above the portal is Moses, and you will find carvings of Justice, Execution, and the Majesty of Law mixed with



Fig. 16. “The Public Buildings in Philadelphia. Commenced 400 B.C. Will be finished doubtless within the memory of the oldest inhabitant.” Cartoon, ca. 1898 [?] A snide commentary on the pace of construction of the new city hall. (Society Print Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania)



Calder’s sculptures North façade



Moses Keystone

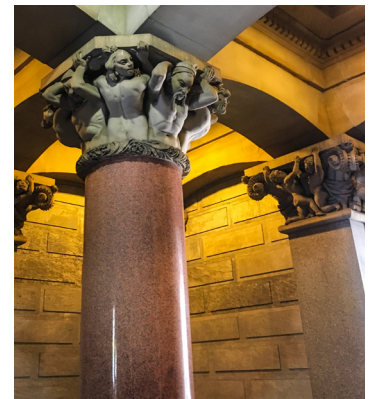
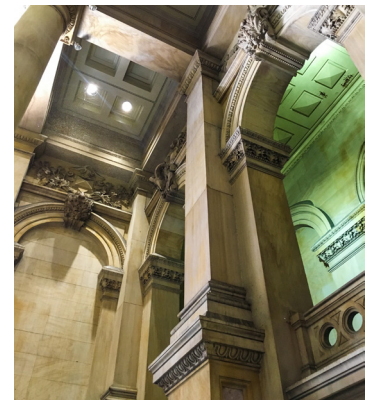
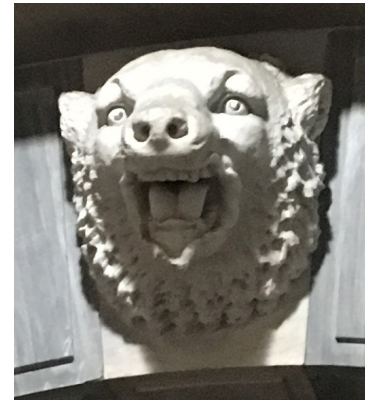
African and South Sea Islanders representing the South. The East Entrance is the Mayor's entrance with a theme of Progress. The keystone is Benjamin Franklin and features sculptures of Industry, Science, and Engineering blended with figures from the Far East. The West Entrance was for the police department and jail with a theme of Repentance. The keystone represents Sympathy with carvings of Charity, Meditation, and Sorrow, here we can also find figures of Western Pioneers and Native Americans representing the West.

A PLACE IN THE SHADE

Passing through the North or the East portal you enter a neoclassic vestibule decorated with granite and marble that is designed to create interesting angles and levels through a series of colonnades and archways. The architectural design is excellent, but once again, it is Calder's sculpture that dominates your attention. The carvings by Calder are just astonishing, and the conceptual thinking behind his art makes entering this space an experience. Located on each wall, you can find busts of animals representing Africa, Asia, Europe, and America. There are four massive columns, each with sculpted capitals of people from every race struggling to hold up the heavy weight of the stone ceiling. Along the side, you find pilasters with capitals featuring the children of the world adding their support, and representing our future. There are cornices with carvings depicting Poetry, Science, Mechanics, Commerce, as well as other trades and professions. This space reminds me of the Michelozzo designed first-courtyard at the Palazzo Vecchio, featuring a fountain by Verrocchio. The weather was hot when I visited City Hall, and the feeling of leaving the hot sun to escape into a cool classically designed space, filled with columns and beautiful decoration took me back to that courtyard in the Palazzo Vecchio, to a time when I escaped the hot Tuscan sun. Both spaces invite you to escape the weather and enjoy the moment before moving on.

HEART OF THE CITY

After passing through the vestibule, you reach the courtyard of City Hall. The courtyard features a stage for music and speeches, café tables, flowers, and gardens, the square serves as a public space much like the Piazza della Signoria at Palazzo Vecchio. The interior courtyard gave the impression of a European square and reminded me of a similar square I visited in Prague. The clock tower soars from the north end, and there are two round turreted towers to the South. The clock tower at City Hall is set-back but centered



Vestibule details including columns.



The tower from the courtyard.

in the plan, at Palazzo Vecchio the tower is off-center because its foundation was from an existing tower built by the Foraboschi family. In the center of the square at City Hall, there is a painted compass design with an illustrated grid of Penn's city plan. If you stand in the center, you can look out each of the four entrance portals to see the streets stretch into the distance. I recalled our text mentioning the Vitruvian description of Roman house courtyards also used in Florentine Palazzi and how you could look through to see the gardens on the opposite side. You feel like you are standing in the direct center of Philadelphia, the heart of the city! The square also serves a functional purpose as the offices and rooms of City Hall, almost 700, either face the street or the courtyard. This was an ingenious way of creating air flow and cross ventilation for hot summer work days.

INTERIOR TOUR

I entered the building through the south pavilion stairwell, each corner pavilion at City Hall features a hanging spiral staircase likely designed by Thomas Ustick Walter. The stairs appear to hang in the air, without visible supports, they are embedded into a 14-inch deep cast iron box in the wall and secured with masonry. This staircase is reminiscent and has similar visual power as the Bramante staircase in the Vatican Museum. The building does provide elevators, but I chose to admire the craftsmanship of the stairs while making my way to the fourth floor.

I had the opportunity to explore the Mayor's Reception Room, Conversation Hall, City Council Chambers, the Caucus Room, and the Mayor's office. The fantastic interior of City Hall features detailed ceilings, sculpture, embellishments, inlaid wood, and colorful mosaic floors, even for mundane spaces like cubicle-filled office space.

I had to pass through an ornate iron gate to access the rooms, the gate signifies that you are entering the City Council wing. I first visited the Caucus Room a small meeting room that features a dazzling blue and gold coffered domed ceiling with a suspended bronze and glass fixture. My favorite detail of this space was the four angels that form a circle with their wings on the medallion at the apex of the dome. The Second Empire features from the exterior such as double Corinthian columns, pediments, and arches are also found in the Caucus Room. It is hard not to see similarities to the Pantheon in this room with its central dome and recessed alcoves, but here there is a square base. Once again, Calder added his conceptual touches; there are four keystones in the room, each



Courtyard square with city plan.



The hanging staircase.



The dome in the Caucus Room.

representing a stage in life (birth, youth, adulthood, and old age). This room functionally compares to a room at the Palazzo Vecchio, the Hall of the Eight, a meeting room for a council responsible for public safety. The Hall of the Eight has a beautiful paneled wood ceiling with rosettes, created in the late fifteenth century likely by the Da Maiano brothers or possibly Leonardo del Tasso based on sketches by Filippino Lippi. While the ceilings of both rooms are extraordinary, the Hall of the Eight features much less decoration elsewhere.

The City Council Chambers is the seat of the local government for Philadelphia, and it is a large two-story room where public hearings take place. It provides space for the council members, and gallery space for the public on the second floor. I will compare this room to the Hall of the Five Hundred at Palazzo Vecchio. Both rooms shared a joint function to provide an ample space for large meetings. The controversial cleric, Girolamo Savonarola (I would love to write a paper about his interesting life) commissioned this room as a meeting space for the Council of 500, part of a newly established Florentine Republic. The original room was not very decorative but not surprising considering the conservative policies of Savonarola. There were numerous renovations through the years including an unfinished mural series by Leonardo Da Vinci—the famous The Battle of Anghiari—and Michelangelo. Giorgio Vasari was ultimately responsible for the significant improvement to the Hall at the request of Cosimo de Medici. Richly decorated, Vasari supervised the painting of multiple battle scenes that represent the military successes of Florence. There were plans in 1896 to add murals to the Council Chambers in Philadelphia; they even selected artists, but the project was never completed. This room, like the others at City Hall features a coffered ceiling painted with eagles, rosettes, and flowers intertwined within the lighting. The floors and walls feature colorful marble mosaics. In the area behind the Council President's chair there is inlaid Mother of Pearl, Tiffany glass and marble. It is a very impressive meeting space.

TOP OF THE CITY

After visiting City Council Chambers, I stopped by the Mayor's Office then made my way to the seventh floor to take a small, 4 person elevator to the top of the clock tower. The trip to the top was an incredible experience, passing level after level, and getting a view of the iron skeleton that supports the tower. I particularly enjoyed catching a glimpse of the inside of the clock face as we traveled past. Clocks like the one in City Hall and Palazzo Vecchio



City Council Chambers.



View of South Broad Street

are a common feature of public buildings. Before pocket watches, clocks on centrally-located municipal buildings were necessary for citizens to keep track of time. After reaching the viewing gallery at the feet of Calder's bronze statue of "Billy Penn," we had a few minutes to enjoy the city views. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to visit the top of the tower at the Palazzo Vecchio. This was likely due to fatigue from climbing to the top of Giotto's Bell Tower or the Duomo's Cupola, adding in 416 more steps to scale the Torre di Arnolfo just seemed impossible.

CIVIC PRIDE

I had one thought after visiting Philadelphia's City Hall, "this building is so European." I have been fortunate enough to travel to cities throughout Europe and have seen first hand the great detail and pride that is on display in European palaces and public buildings, including the Palazzo Vecchio. City Hall is a building designed and decorated in a European style by skilled immigrant artisans. Craftsmanship like this does not exist anymore or would be too impractical and expensive to recreate. Sadly it was only until somewhat recently that the people of Philadelphia began to appreciate City Hall. As late as the 1950s they considered tearing it down, it survived because it would be too expensive to demolish. City Hall and Palazzo Vecchio serve as administrative centers of their cities, but more importantly, they represent power and civic pride. Power and Pride were the most striking similarities I found between the two buildings. Philadelphia's Mayor Brewster wanted this building to be a symbol of the city's prosperity and power and to testify to the public spirit of Philadelphia to future generations. We found the same pride in the Early Renaissance Florentines when they were building the Palazzo Vecchio and Santa Maria del Fiore. Both City Hall and Palazzo Vecchio were planned by cities that were growing in power and wealth. The citizens of Philadelphia can now appreciate the vision of the planners and architects and the incredible effort put forth by the builders and artists, many unnamed, who contributed to the grandeur of this Marble Monster.



City Hall March 1897

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