

# Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Maybe some things just can't be fixed

BY THOMAS M. KEANE JR.

**O**lder, certainly, and if possible, even grayer, the building that architects once named the sixth best in America still looks like “the crate that Faneuil Hall came in.” The “bleak, expansive, and shapeless” brick plain that surrounds it remains “one of the most disappointing places in America.” More than a decade after Boston’s mayor vowed to fix them, City Hall and the Plaza that surrounds it really haven’t changed.

With one exception. At the edge of the Plaza, along Congress Street, stands the skeletal Community Arcade, erected in 2001 and immediately mocked as “a shipwreck ... a disastrous hybrid of many good intentions and too many limitations.” One of those “active edges” with which architects are enamored, it has done little to change the fundamental character of this most desolate of spaces.

This is a not a story of what might be — for there are certainly reams of proposals and writings out there that express that — but rather of what was

not. Since 1993, one international design competition, multiple plans, three civic advisory committees, \$7 million, and the best and most fervent of intentions have wrought little, forcing one to the gloomiest of conclusions: perhaps this is a problem that simply cannot be solved.

**In 1993, then-city councilor Thomas Menino** got the break of a lifetime when then-mayor Raymond Flynn left to become ambassador to the Vatican. Next in line as Council president, Menino ascended the throne. Politically adept, knowledgeable in the ways of power, and personally popular, he seemed positioned to accomplish virtually anything he wanted. And one of the things he most desperately wanted was to bring grandeur to City Hall, to enliven the Plaza he called a “vast wasteland.”

In early 1994, Menino launched a design competition, cosponsored by the Boston Society of Architects. He invited everyone — from architects to school-

children — to submit ideas. In the Athens of America, the thoughts of all were welcomed; the contest sparked much discussion, enormous goodwill, and 190 entries.

But the choice of the top five submissions in December 1994 was deflating. Two were goofy: a “video village” and re-creating the Plaza into the “Tomb of the Bambino.” A third proposed an Abolitionist Museum, another suggested a playground, the last called for the space to be used to display art works.

None of those ideas was taken seriously; the design competition was ultimately little more than a frivolity.

The reason was money. By the time the competition had run its course, a new mayor who had thought the sky the limit had run up against the cold ceiling of finance. City Hall had concluded that, whatever was to happen, someone else had to pay for it. Figuring out who became the job of the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) as well as a newly created organization, the Trust



## 1993

Thomas Menino becomes mayor. Hates the Plaza. Immediately orders palm trees and flowers planted to soften its image.

## 1994

Menino launches Ideas Competition. Menino in December names the top five winners and 11 runners-up out of 190 entries (right).



## 1995

Menino and real estate developer Norman Leventhal organize the quasi-independent Trust for City Hall Plaza.

for City Hall Plaza. Menino asked local developer Norman Leventhal to head the Trust. Leventhal had funded a much admired park at Post Office Square by building an underground garage. The hope was he would apply just such legerdemain to the Plaza.

And with a businessman's sense of purpose, he did just that. By the end of 1996, the Trust announced that it would commit about a quarter of the Plaza to a 350-room hotel and underground garage. Those in turn would generate up-front payments of \$25 million to be used for other improvements.

Meanwhile, Menino was pushing another idea — a pedestrian bridge from the eastern edge of the Plaza to Faneuil Hall. Actually envisioned in some original plans for the area, the bridge would offer safe passage above speeding cars on Congress Street and provide a direct link between City Hall and the popular tourist attractions around Quincy Market. That, too, was proceeding smoothly.

And then both collapsed.

The two projects had been conceived

and nurtured with little outside discussion. When news of the plans leaked out, opposition mounted at a furious pace. Some were upset at the lack of public process. Others wondered about what would happen to the rest of the Plaza — the promised public improvements were vague and uncertain. Preservationists questioned the footbridge. The attorney general argued in a memo that the hotel might require a two-thirds vote of the Massachusetts legislature. The Boston Civic Design Commission started demanding to see plans without a hotel and garage. And the General Services Administration (GSA), the federal agency responsible for the two federal office buildings at the south side of the Plaza, felt left out and threatened to sue. (A disclosure: A city councilor at the time, I was active in opposing both the hotel and the footbridge.)

The most worrisome opposition, however, came from those who challenged the very notion of converting a public space to private use. Since the Menino administration regarded pri-

vate financing as the *sine qua non* for remaking the Plaza, this threatened to undermine the entire project.

Trying to mollify critics, the Trust responded with a concept plan for improvements on the Plaza, and Menino announced the formation of a Civic Advisory Committee (CAC). This last step backfired. Headed by Lawrence Moulter, the builder of the FleetCenter, the advisory committee was stacked with City Hall insiders. Few were fooled. When the CAC at the end of 1997 released a report backing the Trust's plans, it only generated anger.

The BRA reconnoitered. In 1998, it appointed a new CAC, this one headed by Suffolk University Law School dean John Fenton. Even as CAC#2 was holding public meetings, Menino, in a bizarre move, proposed that the city consider selling City Hall. The move seemed to undercut Fenton's efforts. Meanwhile, in another blow to the city's grand plans, the Massachusetts Historical Commission effectively killed the proposed footbridge, ruling that it clashed with Faneuil Hall.

## 1998

City announces a new Citizens Advisory Committee, led by Suffolk University's John Fenton. In April, Menino proposes building a new City Hall somewhere downtown. Massachusetts Historical Commission shoots down the footbridge. Enchanted Village installed on Plaza in a temporary structure



## 1999

The Fenton-led CAC issues its report, killing the hotel and recommending modest changes. In December, the Trust issues new plans, including a new rapid transit station and a trellis-lined walkway, which eventually becomes the Community Arcade.

## 2000

Ground is broken for Community Arcade.

## 1996

Menino proposes a pedestrian bridge from City Hall to Quincy Market. Trust proposes building a 350-room hotel and parking garage that will finance other improvements.

## 1997

Trust names Richard Friedman to build hotel. Opposition mounts. General Services Administration threatens a lawsuit. Boston Civic Design Commission expresses doubts. Trust releases a concept plan that lays out its vision for the Plaza. Architect Henry MacLean proposes “the greening of City Hall” (*right*). Menino creates Civic Advisory Committee, headed by Lawrence Moulter. Its report supports the hotel. CAC and the report denounced as a whitewash.



CAC#2 issued its report in 1999, rejecting the hotel and proposing a series of modest improvements along the edges of the Plaza. The Trust and BRA accepted the committee’s conclusions with regard to the hotel, but continued to push for ideas such as a “civic green” and a “winter garden” that CAC#2 had discarded. By the end of the year, however, the Trust, too, had scaled back its plans, settling on an idea that eventually became the Community Arcade.

During the construction of the arcade, little else occurred. The Trust hoped that the arcade plus a planned redevelopment of the existing MBTA station would somehow spur new interest in the Plaza. When that didn’t happen — the arcade was seen as a flop and the new station never materialized — and at a loss as to what it should do, the Trust organized yet another citizens’ task force. Unlike the two before, this CAC was large, drawing its membership from a wide number of interests, including the GSA. But the group’s report, issued in June 2003, was a disappointment. It had some ideas

— none particularly exciting — but no way to afford them. A frustrated Menino gave up. So, too, did the Trust. “In the last analysis,” says Robert Walsh, by then the chair of the Trust, “we got tired. It was an experiment that failed.”

**And why the failure?** The effort to improve the Plaza had strong political and civic support. Yet no matter what was tried, nothing seemed to work. Grand plans fell apart. Small suggestions never amounted to much. An insider-driven process failed, as did one that invited public participation. True, money was always an issue. The cooperation of the GSA also was always an issue. Yet both, arguably, would have given way if everyone involved had found some compelling new idea.

That didn’t happen. Certainly, there were ideas aplenty. But none was able to command widespread support in large part because of divergent and irreconcilable interests. Advocates of open space clashed with those who wanted small areas of intimacy. Public use clashed

with privatization. Even a planted and greened space clashed with the idea of a civic gathering place.

There was also the problem of City Hall itself. Despite some suggestions for improvement — architect Henry MacLean’s 1997 proposal for “the greening of city hall” included a roof-garden restaurant and an arcade along Congress Street — the building remained problematic. Dressing up the Plaza could do little to hide the ugliness of its most prominent feature.

So can anything be done? In the world of imagination, sure. But in the real world, where results depend upon consensus, money, and political will, the answer may be no. It’s a sobering thought for architects and planners. Get it right the first time. Some mistakes, once built, can never be undone. ■

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PHOTOS: (TOP) COURTESY OF HENRY MACLEAN

## 2001

Community Arcade opens (*below*).



## 2002

Trust organizes 16-member Government Center Task Force to come up with new solutions.

## 2003

The Task Force in June issues a final report. Dull ideas generate an unenthusiastic response. Trust calls it quits.

## 2005

Ideas continue to float around — architect Henry Wood FAIA teams with landscape architect Bill Pressley to champion a new revitalization plan. Few in city government seem to have energy left to go back into battle. A solution to City Hall and its plaza seems as distant as ever.