



AS INDIANAPOLIS MODERNIZES IN AN ATTEMPT to become that “world-class” city we have all heard about, we face challenges about reuse or demolition of existing buildings. How the city deals with one particular building, the Old Indianapolis City Hall, could become a model for looking to the past to save our architectural future.

The wonderful old City Hall, a beautiful Neoclassical building completed in 1910, begs for smart reuse and a chance to escape the wrecking ball that has toppled so many of our architectural jewels.

Most recently used as the interim Indianapolis/Marion County Central Library, before that the building housed the Indiana State Museum for almost 40 years. But before that, it was a brand spanking-new City Hall – a shiny, silver dollar example of civic pride and municipal ingenuity.

When Charles Bookwalter won the Indianapolis mayor’s office in 1906 one of his first priorities was to build a new city hall large enough to house all of the city offices in one building. In those halcyon days when our leaders knew that remarkable architecture is a hallmark of a great city, the mayor opened a competition for the building’s design. The winner of the competition was the architectural firm, Rubush and Hunter. Although a relatively new partnership, the firm had already cut its architectural teeth on a large commission designing the Indiana School for the Deaf before winning the prize of designing City Hall, according to the “Encyclopedia of Indianapolis.”

Inspired by the 1893 World’s Exposition in Chicago, Rubush and Hunter planned a building in the Neoclassical style popularized at the exposition. Indianapolis’s choice of this design reflected not only the city’s desire to impress but also a hope to inspire its citizenry with the “City Beautiful” tenets born at the Chicago Exposition. The philosophy was, notably, that beautiful, massive, and symmetrically balanced public buildings provided an inspiration to the urban citizenry to live uplifting, balanced lives committed to the public good.

Mayor Bookwalter had the new building’s cornerstone inscribed: “I am myself a citizen of no mean city.” Bookwalter borrowed part of this quote from the Apostle Paul, but the mayor added the first three words, making it a declaration of pride in his own city. The cornerstone was laid in July 1909 and the City



▲ The Old City Hall was listed on the National Register in 1974 and was documented for the Historic American Building Survey in 1981.

What does the future hold for old City Hall?

Hall opened with fanfare in December 1910. By then a new mayor had replaced Bookwalter. Samuel Lewis “Lew” Shank (who became a vaudevillian when he left office a few years later) presided at the opening ceremonies.

The exterior of the massive building was clad in Bedford limestone and decorated with two-story-tall Doric columns. It was a limestone-faced, bricks-and-mortar statement of civic pride. The interior was a wonderland of opulent materials and grand spaces. Three sets of bronze doors opened to a central rotunda that was lit by a 750-square foot stained-glass dome skylight. Inlaid marble floors reflected the beauty of the hand-painted murals on the walls.

The building was beautiful, modern, and expensive. High-speed electric elevators, telephone connections in every room and automatic thermostats were some of the most up-to-date amenities that made work easier for the bureaucrats who occupied offices in the new city building. The construction cost a

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whopping \$699,239, plus an additional \$113,000 for the site. Although the spending might have seemed excessive in 1910, the building promised efficient government housed beneath one roof.

Unfortunately, Indianapolis's bureaucracy grew so much in the first half of the 20th century that, within a few decades, the new, expansive City Hall had become the old, cramped City Hall. By the 1950s both the City Hall and the Marion County Courthouse were over capacity, and employees were spilling over into rented spaces Downtown. Although Unigov wasn't yet a reality, in 1962 the governing bodies of Marion County and the City of Indianapolis decided to consolidate their offices into a new building. The new City-County Building paid homage to the defining architecture of its day, the International Movement, just as the Old City Hall had been a reflection of the stylish architecture of its period. The Neoclassicism of the old City Hall looked ancient in comparison to the sleek, glass curtain walls of the new City-County Building.

Although the old City Hall survived the wrecking ball (unlike the former Marion County Courthouse), it sat vacant for more than a decade until the Indiana State Museum opened there in 1967. The state invested \$830,000 converting the old city offices into museum space. The museum occupied the building for 34 years. But, in 2001 the doors closed at the City Hall building, and a few months later the museum opened in a new building on the Central Canal. The old City Hall was again empty.

Then, in 2002, a temporary and clever refunctioning made the building useful once again. During renovation and expansion of the Indianapolis/Marion County Public Library building, workers moved the library collection temporarily to the old City Hall. In 2003 the building opened as the Interim Central Library. The old building, so sturdily built, held the library's 700,000 volumes in style. Book stacks circled the floors around the rotunda and offered a bibliophilic eye candy feast to those entering the huge brass doors. Construction problems with the library expansion kept the interim library at the City Hall much longer than originally anticipated, offering the building several more years of service to the city. Then, in 2007, workers moved the collection back to its home. And the old City Hall was once again shuttered.

Since that time the Indianapolis Department of Metropolitan Development has formed a committee to propose possible reuses for the building. According to DMD Principal Planner, Robert Wilch, the Old City Hall Reuse Advisory Committee has focused primarily on options that would use the building for arts-related purposes or for office space, but the committee hasn't yet reached a consensus or proposed a plan to the city that would keep the building open and purposeful.

For more than a year, the grand old building has been vacant, no doubt creating a troubling specter for city officials. And an invitation for discussion about demolition and redevelopment of the site. So far, city leaders have refused to RSVP to that invitation. This column is meant as an encouragement for them to continue to look for ways to reuse the Old City Hall. Here's hoping today's city leaders recognize the value in this wonderful old building. Although it was constructed at a time when the phrase "world-class city" had no meaning (perhaps it still has none), the city leaders and citizens of that time could easily see the pride of their boast that Indianapolis was "no mean city" in the majestic rotunda of that grand building. And it deserves another chance to make us proud. ■

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