

SIENA'S PIAZZA DEL CAMPO AS A PRECEDENT FOR BOSTON

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ABSTRACT

The failure of Boston's current City Hall Plaza is frequently attributed to its use of Siena's Campo as a precedent. This thesis will argue that the fault lies not with the Campo itself, but with the way in which it was adapted. Whereas the planners and architects of the 1960s Government Center transformed the Campo in accordance with preconceived ideals of modernist design, this project illustrates an adaptation of the urbanistic qualities of the Campo to Boston's specific architectural dialect.

In September of 2004, the Project for Public Places published rankings of the best and the worst public squares and plazas in the world. Topping the list of the best public spaces was the Piazza del Campo in Siena. The City Hall Plaza in Boston, a design explicitly modeled on the Campo¹ held the corresponding place on the list of the world's *worst* public spaces.²

The public reception of Boston City Hall itself has not been any more favorable. In November of 2008, the editors and readers of the online travel magazine *virtualtourist.com* voted the Boston City Hall to the top of their ranking of "The world's top ten ugliest buildings." The accompanying article described the building thus: "While it was hip for its time, this concrete structure now gets routinely criticized for its dreary facade and incongruity with the rest of the city's more genteel architecture. Luckily, it's very close to more aesthetically pleasing attractions."³ The building is also famously disliked by the current mayor of Boston, Thomas Menino, who has recently proposed its replacement.

One commonly heard explanation for the failure of City Hall Plaza is that Siena's Campo would not succeed in Boston as it succeeds in Siena. Some speculate that the colder Boston climate does not lend itself to an open, paved piazza. Alternately, it is hypothesized that Bostonians are incapable of appreciating Italian-style piazze because of ingrained cultural habits which are too far removed from those of Tuscany.

These assertions are unconvincing. No outdoor public spaces, large or small, planted or paved, can completely mitigate the effects of a New England winter. Nevertheless, there are notably successful examples of paved plazas in northern climates,

¹ Carr, Stephen. *Public Space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. p 88.

² http://www.pps.org/info/newsletter/september2004/september2004_best_worst

³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyleMolt/idUSTRE4AD2V720081114>

for instance, in Antwerp and Bruges. These Flemish examples also discredit the notion that non-Italian cultures cannot sustain characteristically Italian plazas.

More important than these observations, is the reality of just how different Boston's Plaza is from Siena's Campo. Indeed, other than the obvious similarities – that both the Campo and the Plaza are sloped, paved in brick, and incorporate their respective city halls – the two spaces could not provide a greater contrast. In analyzing these two places, we find again and again that Boston's plaza is much more the result of preconceived Modernist design ideologies than of any careful study and adaptation of the Campo.

The formal differences become immediately apparent when comparing figure-ground plans of the two spaces. (fig. 1)



Figure 1. A figure ground comparison of the Campo and City Hall Plaza, at the same scale.

Remarkably, what was supposed to be inspired by the Campo turns out to be, spatially, almost the precise inverse. In Siena, the piazza is surrounded by a densely built urban fabric, which encloses the space almost completely, generating a sense of containment and definition. The figure is the void. In Boston, the space is much more poorly defined by a much sparser fabric, and the space surrounds the city hall at least as much as the city hall defines the space. The figure is the solid. To the extent that

Boston's Plaza is at all defined, it is well over twice the area of Siena's campo. These differences could not have been lost on the planners of City Hall Plaza, and it must be assumed that the changes were intentional divergences from Siena, based on Modernist design premises: The building is a sculptural object, meant to be appreciated *in the round*. Distinction can be achieved through the reversal of expectations. Bigger is better.

The functional differences are also critical to the relative success of the two spaces. The buildings which define the campo are multi-functional. The *Palazzo Pubblico* occupies about a sixth of the Campo's perimeter, while the remainder is a continuous ring of ground floor commercial use with a mix of commercial and residential occupancies above. Thus, the space is continually active. In Boston, the proportions are more or less reversed. Approximately one third of the edge of the plaza (including the four sides of the city hall) has ground-floor commercial usage. There is almost no residential frontage. The remaining square footage is devoted to offices.

Furthermore, whereas the Campo is entirely pedestrian-oriented, two of the four sides of the Plaza are edged by four or more lanes of traffic. This includes the vast majority of the aforementioned commercial frontage, thereby significantly reducing their effectiveness in activating the plaza.

Again, neither of these differences are an oversight. Rather, they are the logical manifestations of modernist planning policies, which proposed increased efficiency through monofunctional zoning and gave preference to the automobile over pedestrian circulation by creating larger blocks surrounded by larger roads. Thanks to these efforts, it is now easy to bypass City Hall Plaza by car and difficult to reach City Hall Plaza by foot.

While the urban design strategy claims to take Siena as a starting point, even as it inverts most of Siena's formal principles, there is no similarly explicit allusion with regard to the architectural expression of the buildings themselves. To the designers of City Hall and Government Center, Siena's architecture would have seemed as irrelevant as Boston's own preexisting architecture (a good portion of which was literally discarded in the creation of the new City Hall and Plaza). Nonetheless, a comparison is valuable, not least because it is one of the great errors of mid-20th century Modernism was to suppose that urban design can be considered independently of architecture – that the success of Siena's space could be replicated without regard for the architecture that defines it. My argument here is not for a close imitation of Siena's particular architectural *style* (Boston has little use for crenellations). Rather, I am advocating an application of the principles of design which are manifested in both Sienese and traditional Bostonian architecture, and especially a consideration of the way that buildings within a city relate to each other.

When a visitor encounters the Campo for the first time, he will perceive two things immediately about the Palazzo Pubblico. Firstly, it is the most important of all the buildings which face the Campo. Secondly, although it is more important than the other buildings, it is closely *related* to those buildings (in its materials, construction, proportion, details). The Palazzo Pubblico is effective as the icon of Siena, because it seems to grow out of the city's established architectural traditions to become the fullest expression of the character of Siena. This establishment of architectural hierarchies and relationships provides not only a means of identifying buildings in the city, but also a

means by which people can identify *with* buildings, since the relationship between buildings reflects the relationships between people.

Boston's City Hall Plaza presents the first-time visitor with a far murkier picture of the relationship of the City Hall to the City. In adopting an architectural aesthetic that deliberately rejected any reference to local precedent, the designers of Boston City Hall and the other buildings of Government Center ensured a profound discontinuity with the rest of the city, creating a disjuncture not only in time but also in space. By abandoning the existing language of Bostonian architecture, the architects prohibited their buildings from communicating with the preexisting architectural fabric of the city. Thus, the problem is less that the current Boston City Hall has the *improper* relationship to the rest of the buildings in the city, but rather that we have no reasonable way of understanding what its relationship is at all. When we look at the Palazzo Pubblico in the Campo, or at the Massachusetts State House on Beacon Hill, the buildings reflect a government that belongs to the society that it governs. (figs. 2-5) There is no such clarity at City Hall Plaza.

In addition to recognizing these inevitable results of the introduction of an alien form of architectural expression to a traditional city, it is worth noting some characteristics about the nature of that expression itself. Beyond their inability to "communicate" with any of the pre-existing buildings, the buildings of Government Center seem not to have much greater success speaking to each other either. They are similar, certainly – in scale, shape, texture, material – so they at least relate to each other. But unlike the traditional buildings of Boston and Siena, they are *only* similar, and not also differentiated. It is not so much that they lack variety, but that they lack hierarchy.

Much is made of the way in which Boston City Hall's façade does express the hierarchy of the city government – that one can differentiate between the large window of the mayor's office, the several medium-sized windows of the city councilors, and the many small windows of the bureaucracy. This is perhaps the most celebrated aspect of the building's design, and it is arguably the least "Modernist" aspect. However, we must realize what an isolated and inadequate vestige of traditional architectural design this is, when we observe that there is no hierarchical distinction between the City Hall itself, the adjacent office buildings, and the nearby parking garage. (fig. 6-9)

Having examined the divergent principles at work in Siena and Boston, it remains to imagine what a civic centerpiece to Boston might look like if it took to heart the most important lessons of Siena. There are universal formal considerations which will be just as successful in the New England snow as in the Tuscan sun. The size of the Campo is generous while still connected to the human scale. The height, proportions, and continuity of its edges are characteristic of many successful urban spaces. The texture and variety within the consistency of the background buildings is likewise found in many of the most celebrated cities, as is the mix of uses accessible to the pedestrian. There is an asymmetry to the Campo which is very much compatible with the irregular plan of downtown Boston, and this may retained to good effect.

The primary difference, of course, aside from the particular urban pressures which inevitably act within the guiding principles above, will be the details of the architecture. The requirements of today's government and our building codes will legitimately affect the form of the buildings, making them inevitably "of our time." But more important for the long-term benefit of the city is that the buildings should relate to the best of Boston's

architectural traditions. If it speaks the language of the city's most cherished neighborhoods and monuments, it will be able to find its place among them.

These principles, both urbanistic and architectural, are illustrated in the accompanying design proposal (see appendix). The proposed City Hall Plaza is now similar in size and shape to the Campo, and it incorporates mixed use on three sides. While the City Hall itself, due to its necessary size, forms two sides of the plaza, one of those incorporates retail into the ground floor. The other side provides both a ceremonial stair leading to the various public offices and meeting hall, and at the ground level, to the offices which require frequent public interaction: the Collecting Division and the Registry Division. Thus, all four sides of the plaza would directly address the space itself. By creating this smaller, clearly-defined space, the proposal is also able to reestablish Hanover Street, the primary commercial street of the North End, in its prior location. This street would now pass between the civic and the federal office buildings, before connecting with Cambridge Street. Finally, the plan gives new prominence to Faneuil Hall, one of Boston's most famous landmarks, by framing its West façade and linking it to City Hall Plaza by a grand stair, on a direct axis with the campanile and the south wing of the City Hall.

Architecturally, the proposal seeks to tie the new City Hall to its context, adopting the particular classical language championed by Bulfinch. The building looks both to Bulfinch's iconic Boston monuments, the Massachusetts Statehouse, Faneuil Hall, as well as to those buildings of Georgian England, which provided sources of inspiration for Bulfinch himself. Thus, the new city hall takes formal and stylistic cues from Adams and Chambers, especially Somerset House in London. The material palette of brick and

limestone is intended to harmonize with Boston's vernacular architectural fabric, while the scale and level of ornamentation clearly identify it as a preeminent civic building. The scale of its dome surpasses the cupolas of Faneuil Hall, but defers to the Statehouse, thereby establishing the City Hall's appropriate place in the civic hierarchy. The freestanding campanile is intended as a civic icon, a Bostonian allusion to the asymmetrically placed towers of Venice and especially Siena. Aligned with the long axis of Hanover Street, and visible from most important approaches to the plaza, not to mention Boston Harbor, it serves as a beacon signaling the location of the heart of the city.

This site, at the juncture of several of Boston's greatest neighborhoods, is the logical place for the seat of civic governance. It is thus all the more unfortunate that the current government center is so vacuous, so indifferent to its surroundings. The goal of this project is to design a City Hall and Plaza which will be as a keystone: the centerpiece which supports, completes, and becomes an integral part of the whole city.



Figure 2. Siena: Background Buildings



Figure 3. Siena: Civic Building



Figure 4. Boston: Background Buildings



Figure 5. Boston: Civic Building



Figure 6. Boston: Modernist Office Building



Figure 7. Boston: Modernist City Hall



Figure 8. Boston: Modernist Office Building



Figure 9. Boston: Modernist Parking Garage

APPENDIX I: PROJECT IMAGES



Figure 10: Context figure-ground plan & site plan



Figure 11: Figure-ground plans: Siena; current Boston City Hall; proposed Boston City Hall



Figure 12: Figure-ground plan: Siena



Figure 13: Figure-ground plan: current Boston City Hall



Figure 14: Figure-ground plan: proposed Boston City Hall

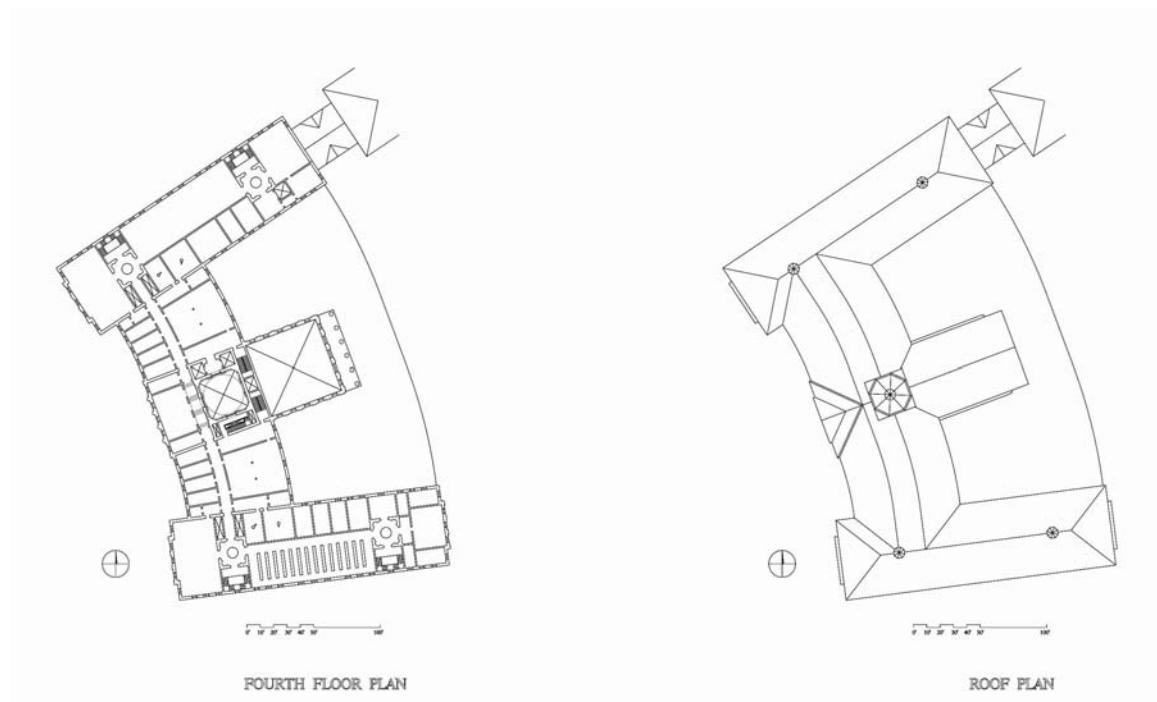


Figure 15: Plans: fourth floor; roof

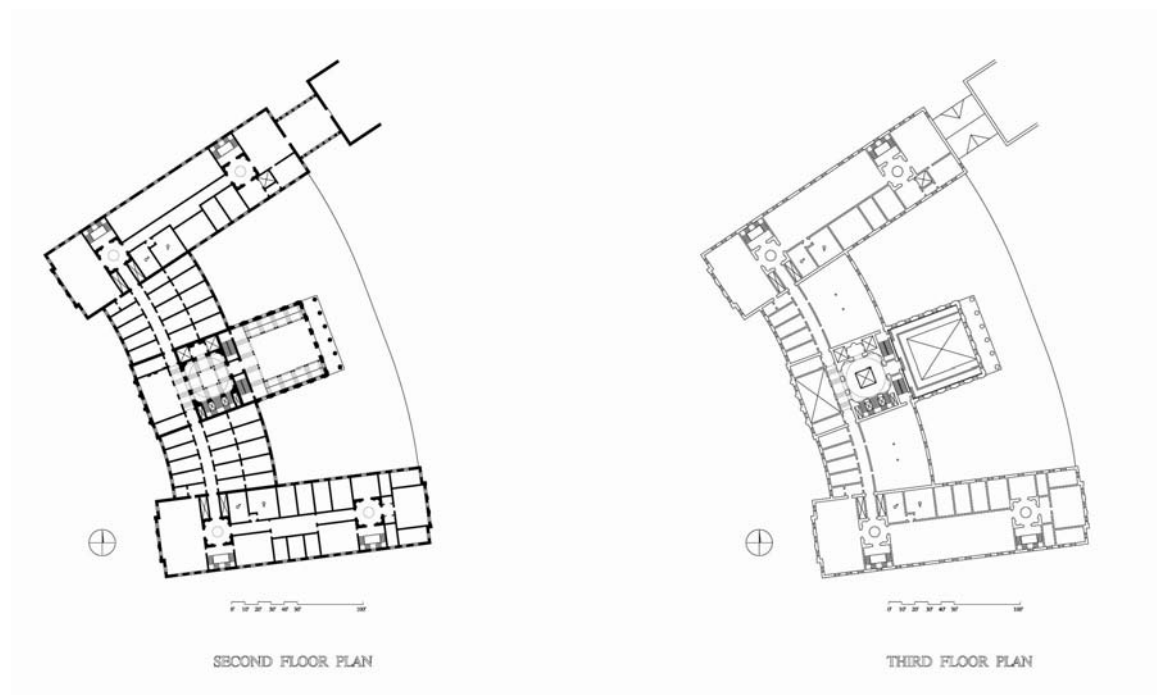


Figure 16: Plans: second floor, third floor

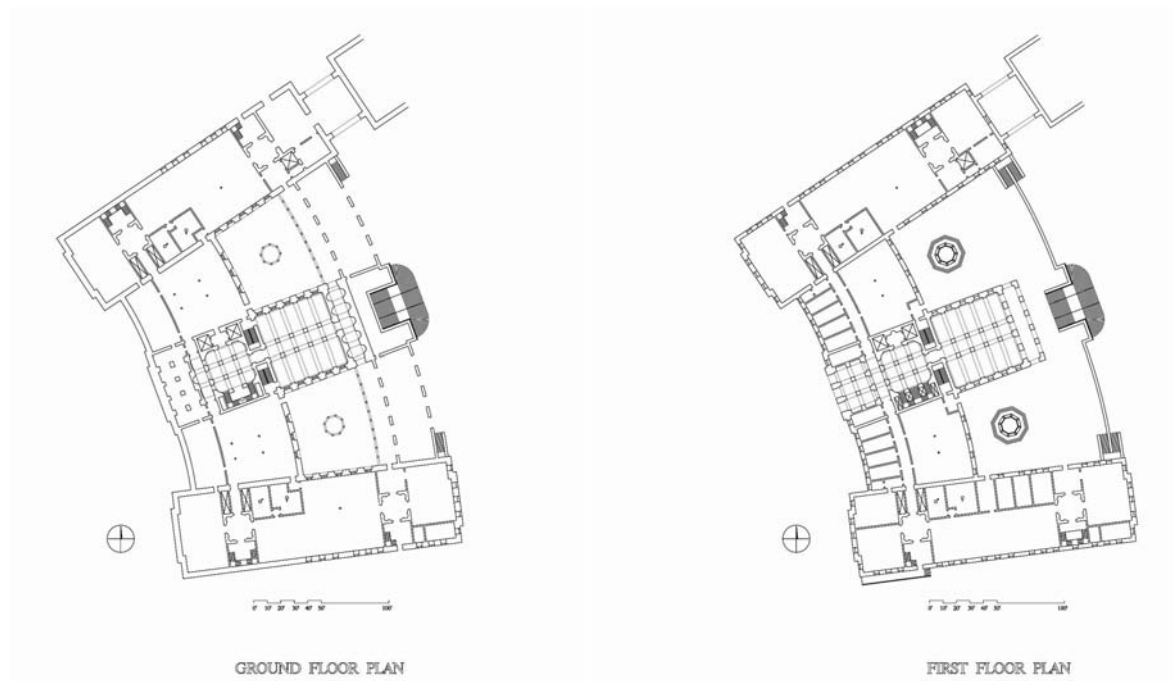


Figure 17: Plans: ground floor; first floor

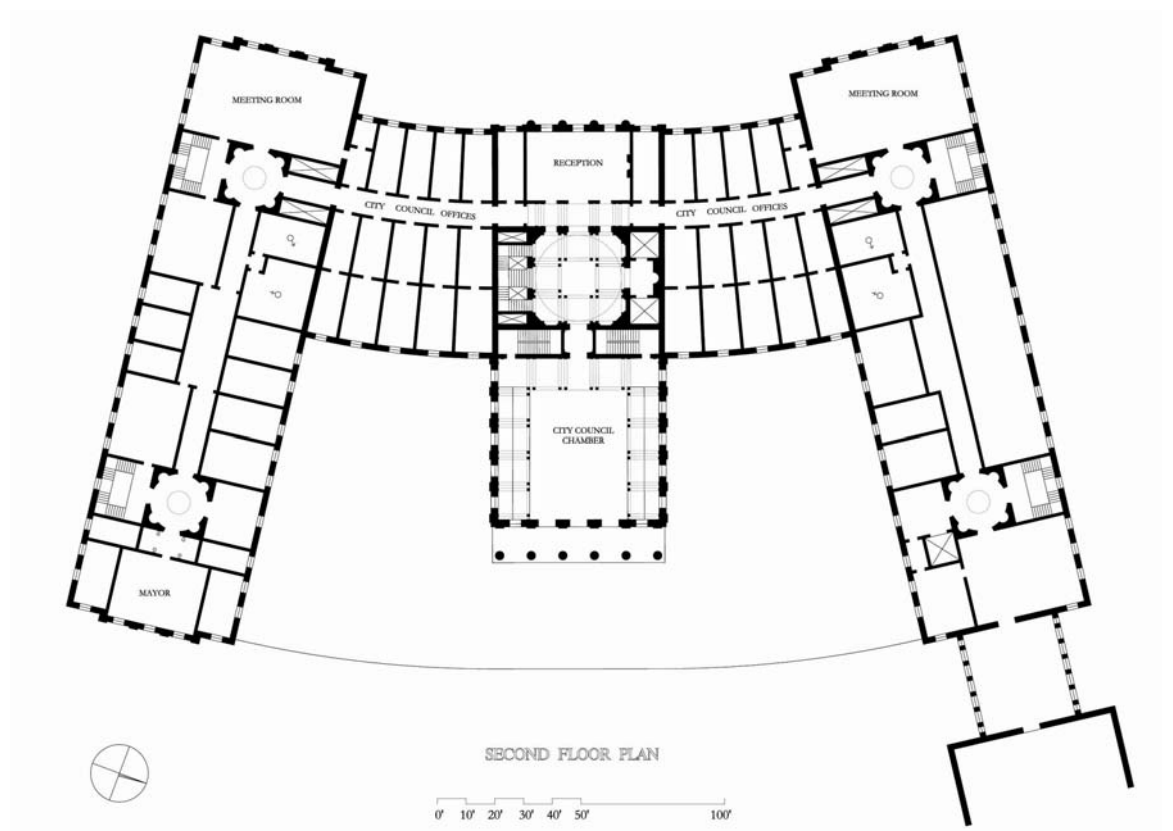


Figure 18: Second floor plan



Figure 19: East Elevation



Figure 20: West elevation; south elevation, details



Figure 21: East façade detail



Figure 22: Details

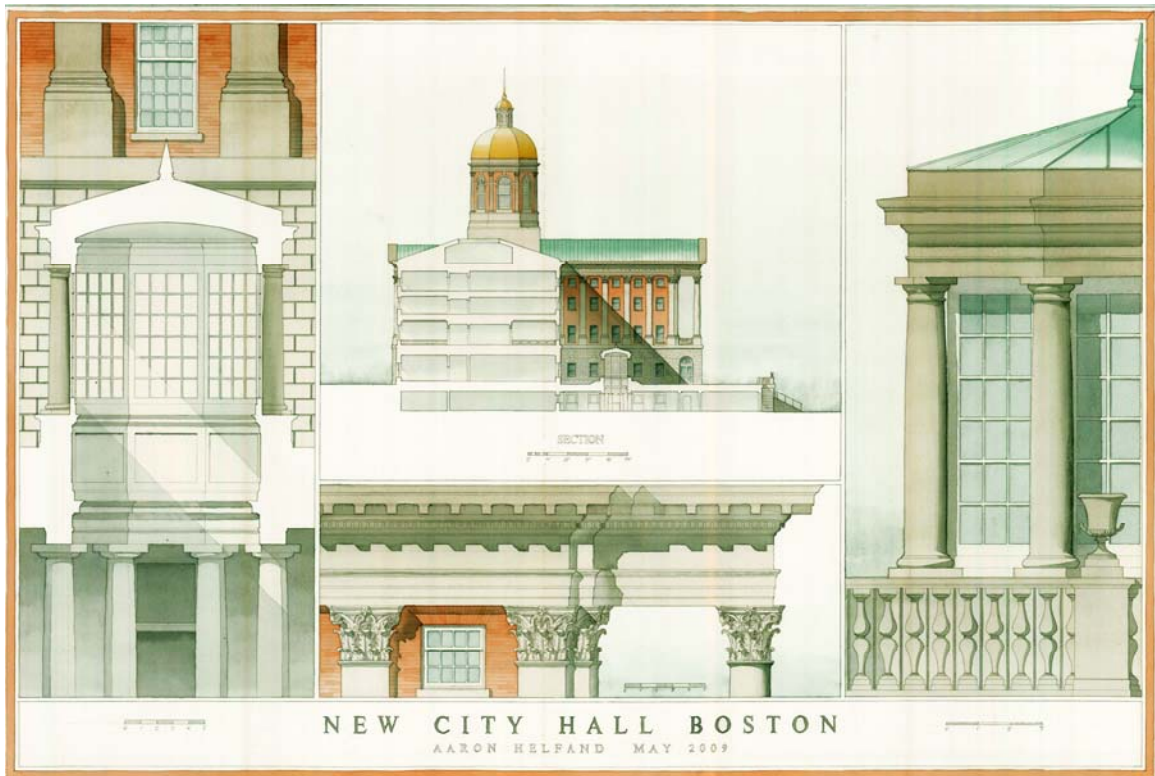


Figure 23: Section, details

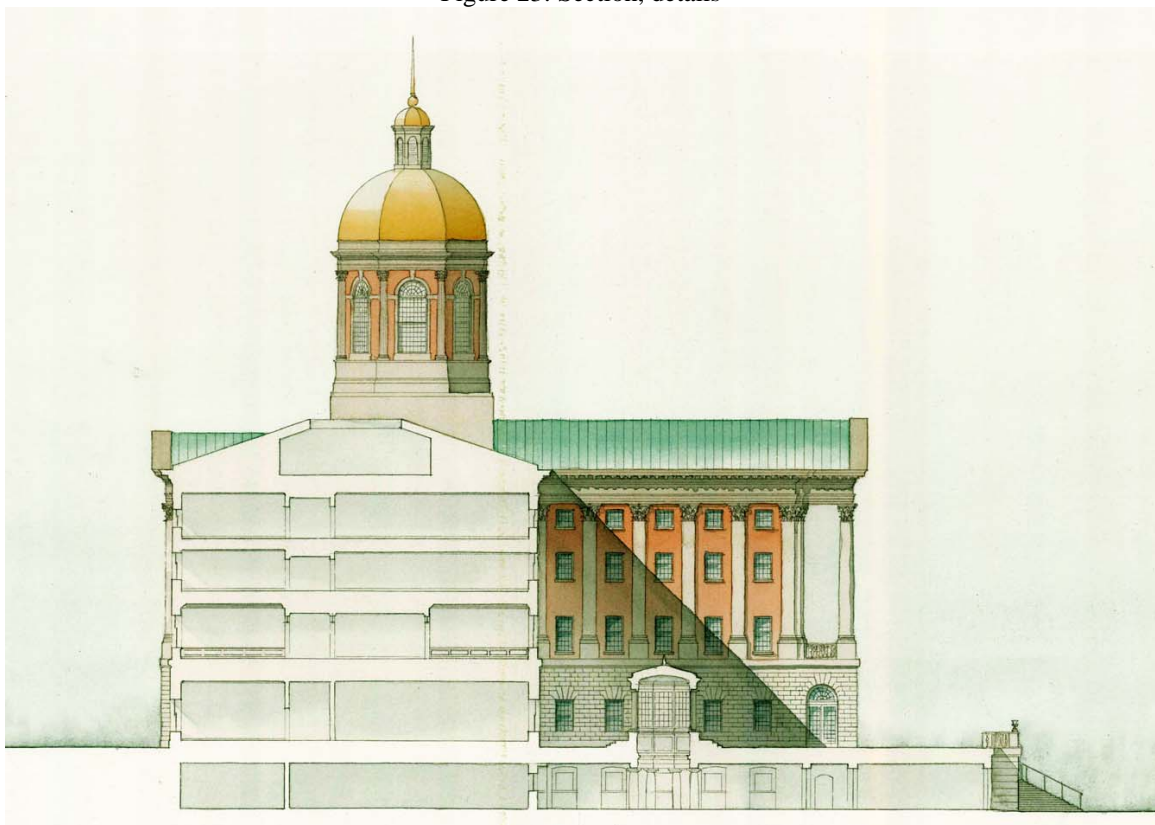


Figure 24: Section

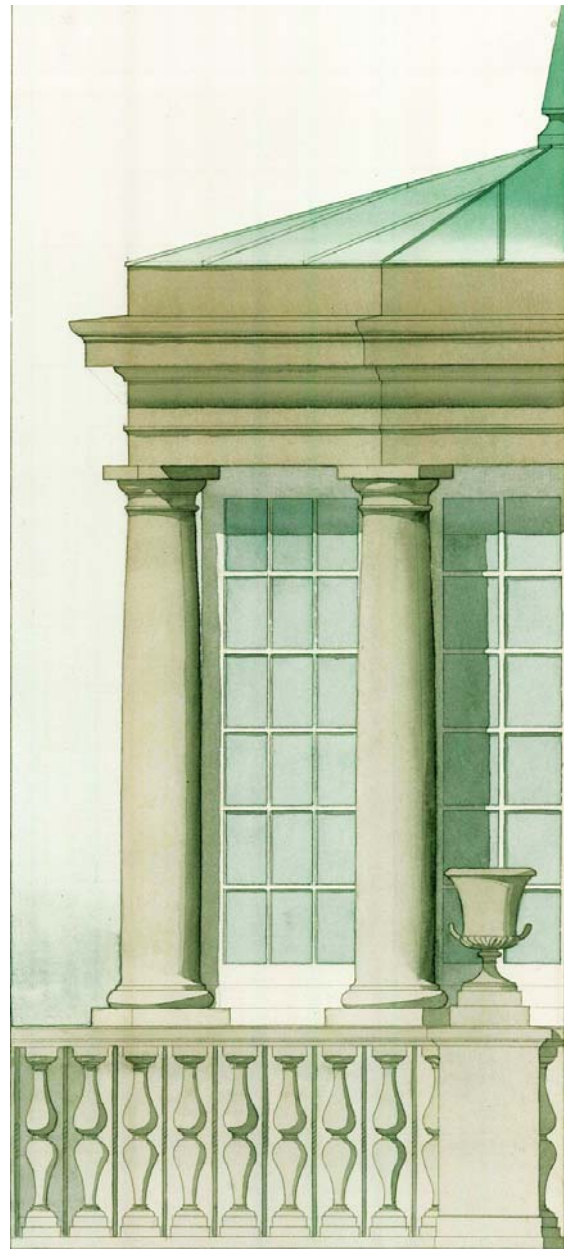
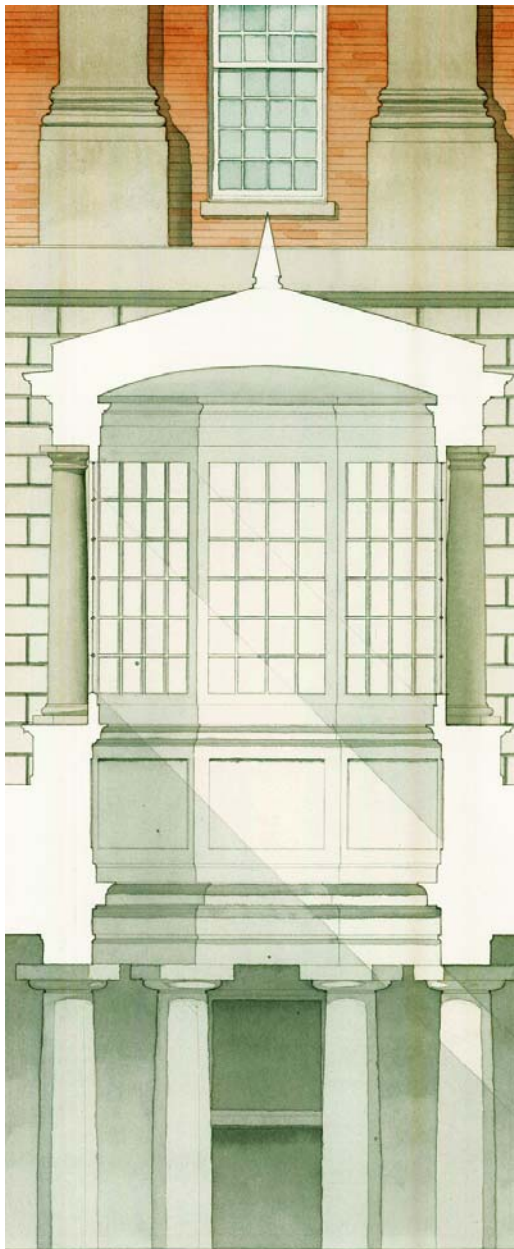
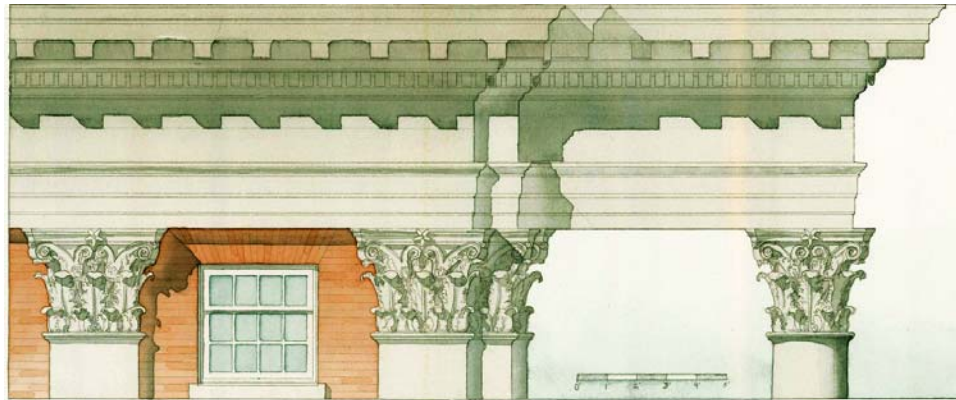


Figure 25: Details



Figure 26: Section

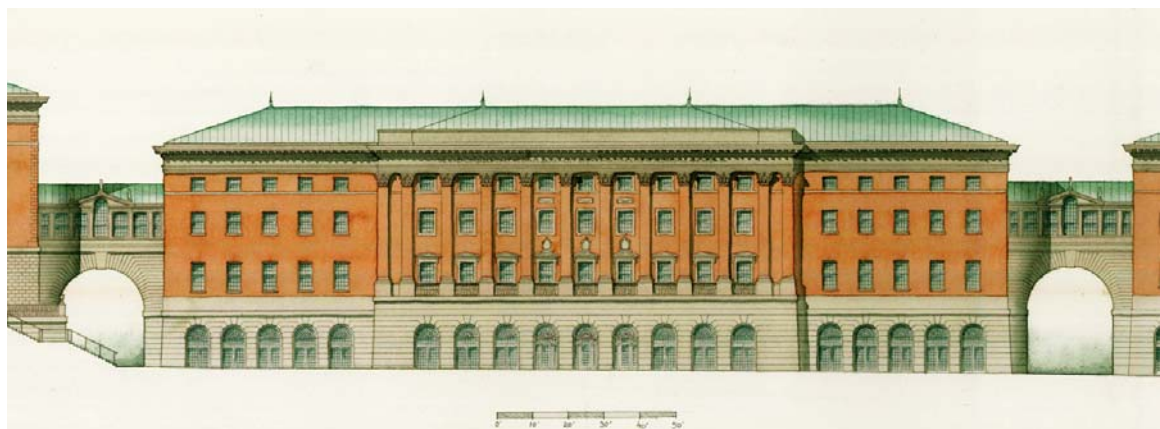
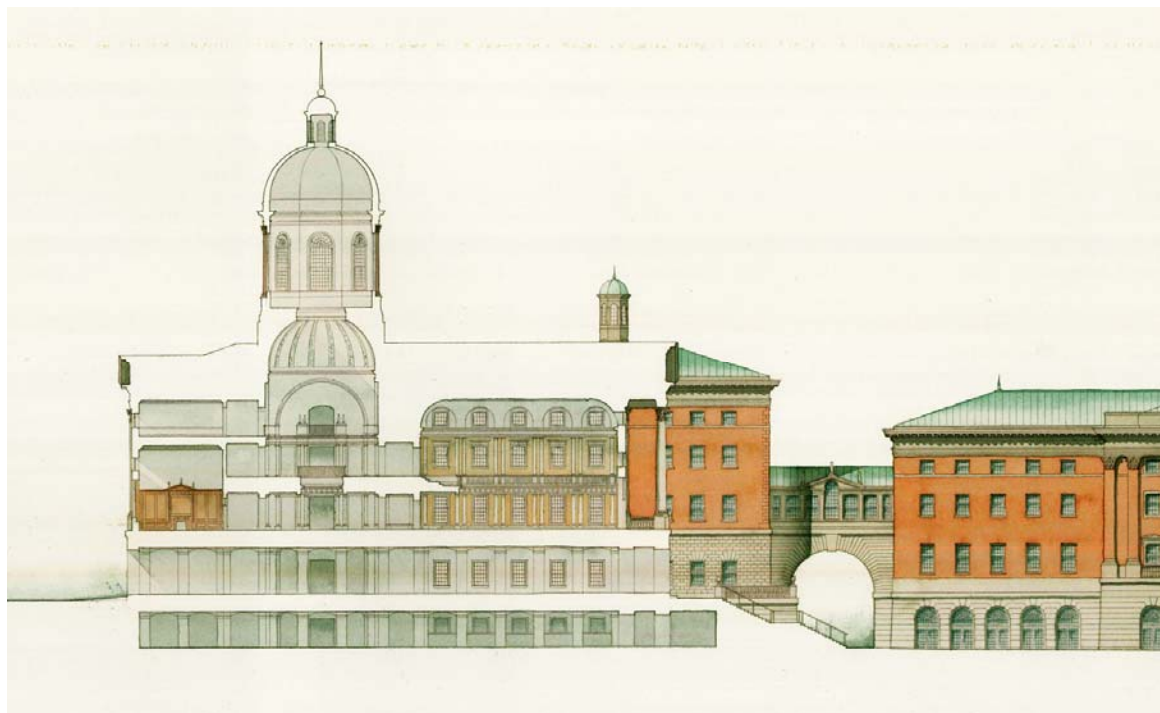


Figure 27: Section details



Figure 28: Arch Detail

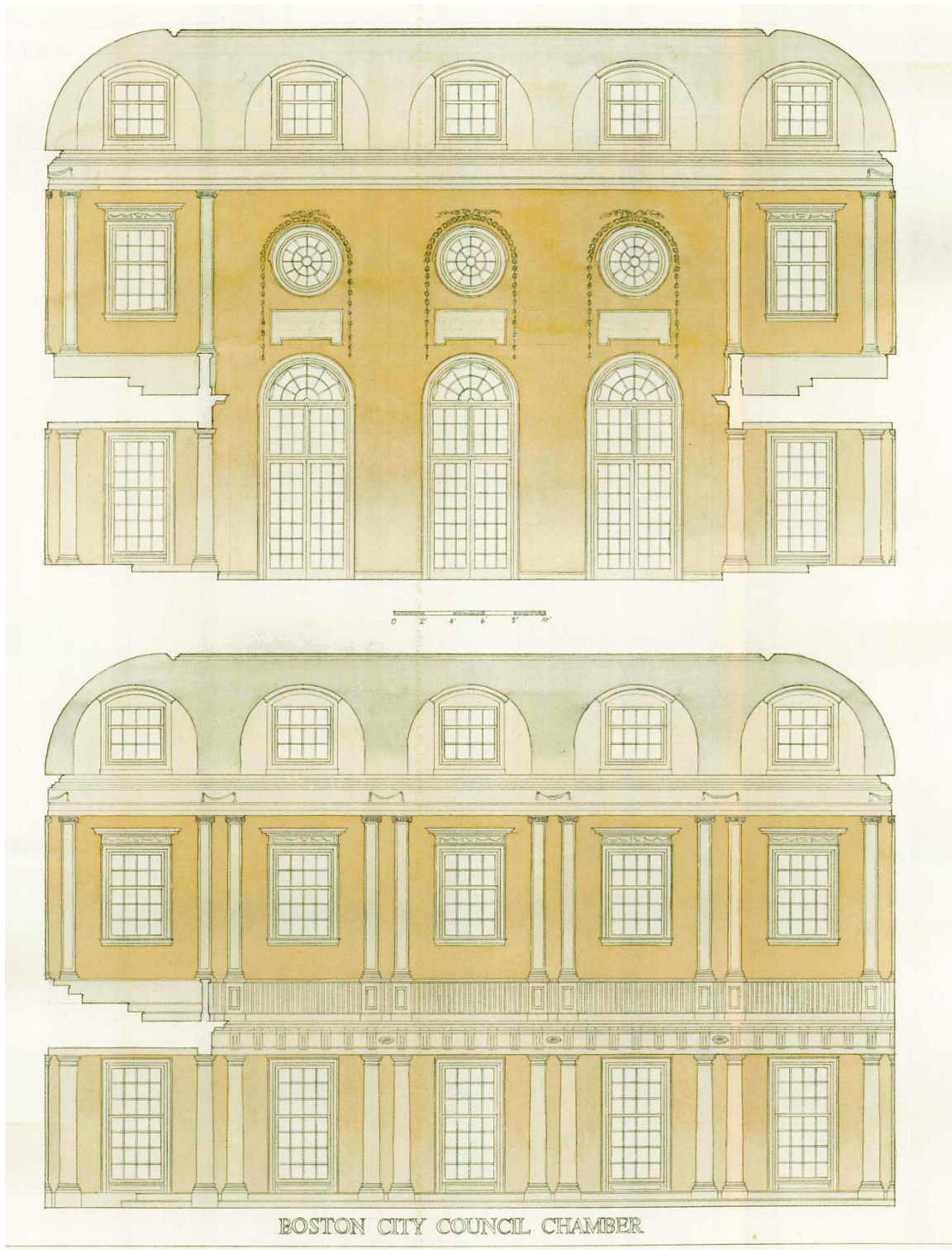


Figure 29: Interior: City Council Chamber

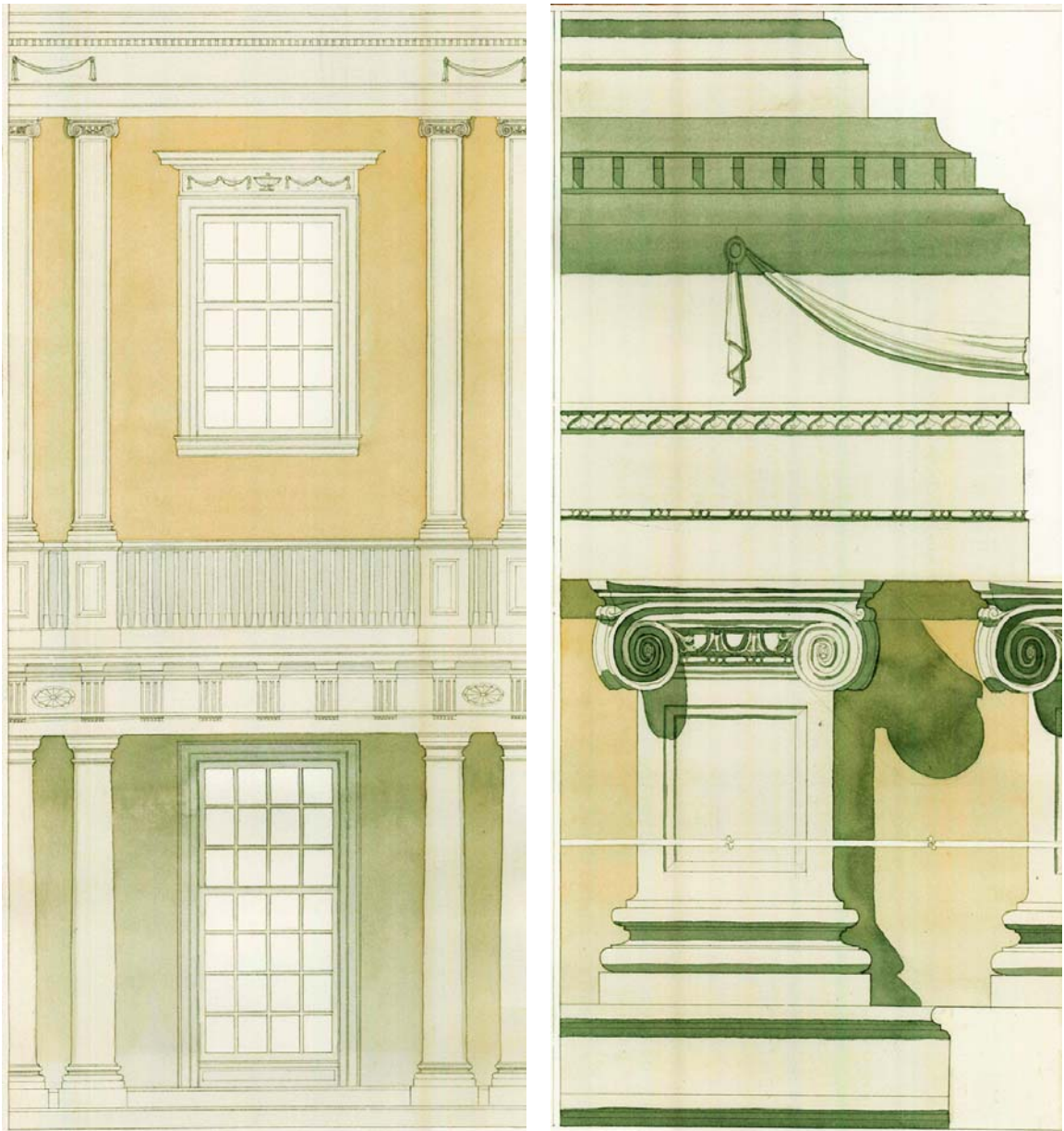


Figure 30: Interior Details: City Council Chamber

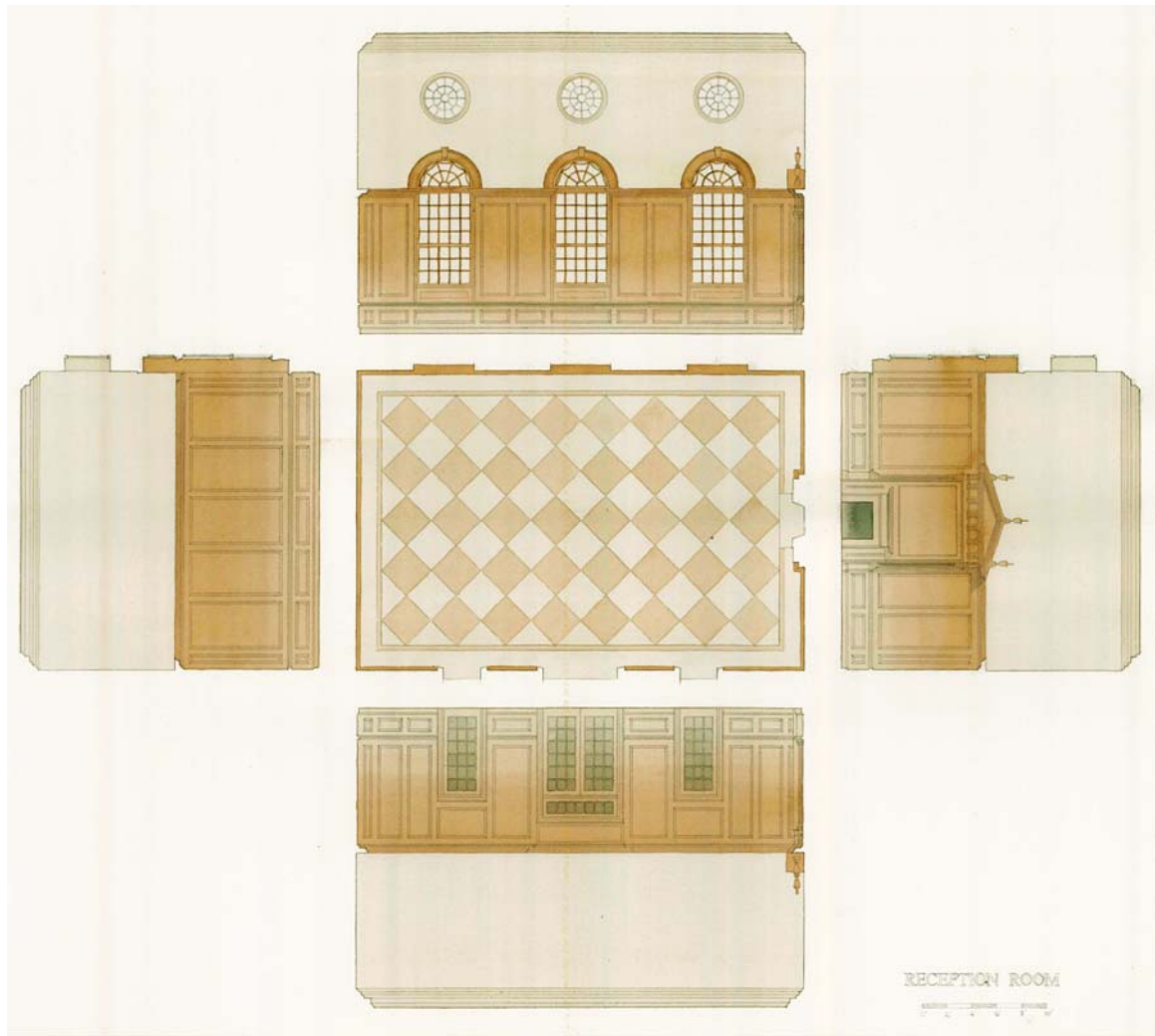


Figure 31: Interior: Reception room



Figure 32: Interior Details: Reception Room

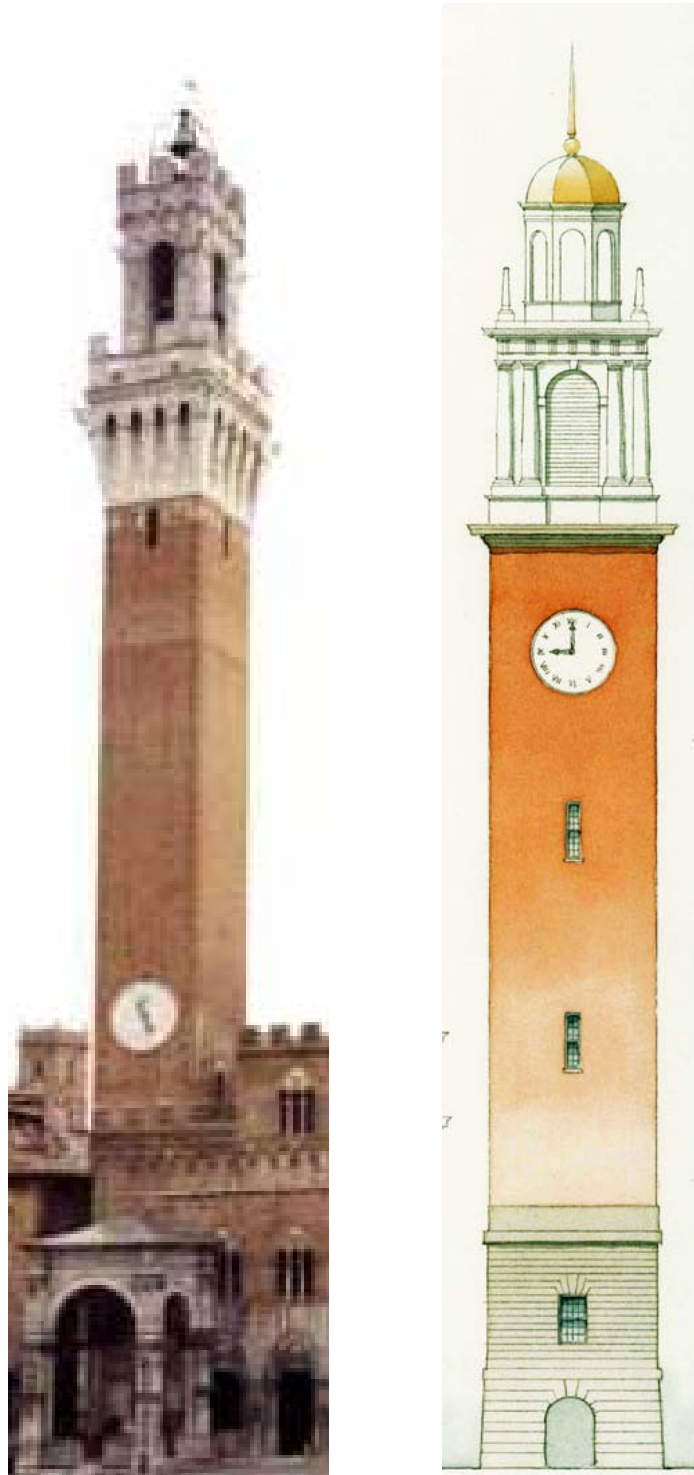


Figure 33: Towers: Siena & Boston

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