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SAN FRANCISCO DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING

**JUNE 1953**

*AN INTRODUCTORY PLAN FOR THE*  
**CIVIC CENTER**

**SAN FRANCISCO DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING**

# AN INTRODUCTORY PLAN FOR THE CIVIC CENTER

A preliminary plan indicating a possible form for future expansion of the Civic Center of San Francisco

June 1953

SAN FRANCISCO DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING  
100 Larkin Street . Civic Center . San Francisco 2





CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO

DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING

100 LARKIN STREET • CIVIC CENTER • SAN FRANCISCO 2, CALIFORNIA

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MAYOR

PAUL OPPERMANN  
DIRECTOR OF PLANNING  
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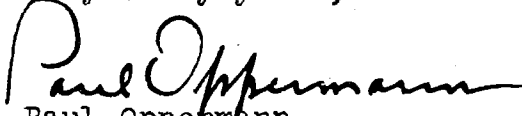
The City Planning Commission  
The Honorable Elmer E. Robinson, Mayor  
The Board of Supervisors

Gentlemen:

The City Planning Commission on May 22, 1952 directed me to advance the study of the Civic Center problem as far as feasible during the 1952-53 fiscal year with regular staff help. This report is submitted in response to that directive.

Presented in this report for your consideration are certain broad aspects of the problem of growth and change in the Civic Center, and a suggested form for expansion. Also indicated are suggested next steps towards the preparation, adoption, and execution of a soundly conceived precise plan for future development in the Civic Center.

Very truly yours,

  
Paul Oppermann  
Director of Planning

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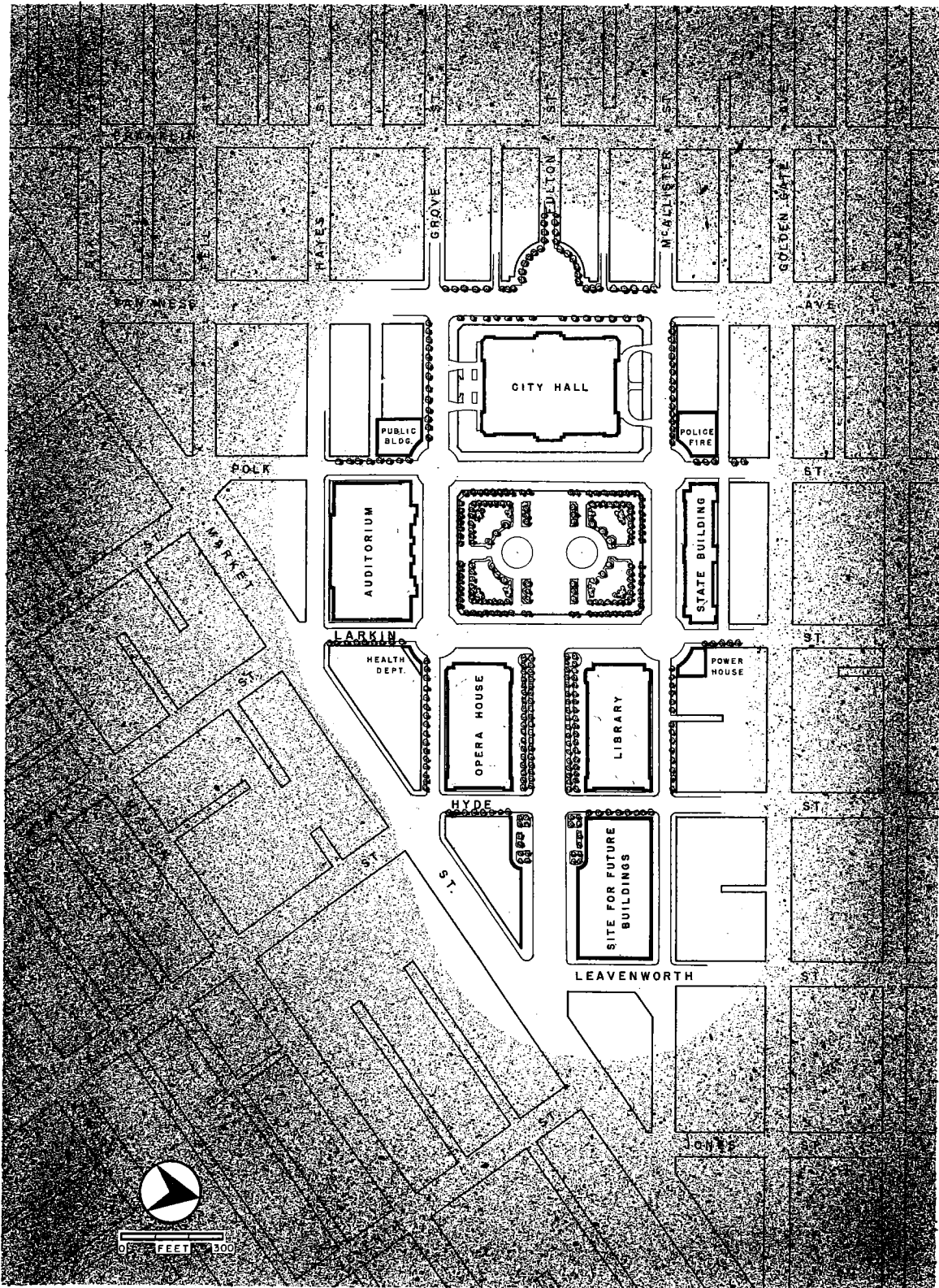
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*not correct date, Apr 25 60 1911 or earlier*

# 1911 PLAN FOR CIVIC CENTER

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MAP

## INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

There can be little doubt that significant new facilities are going to be added to the San Francisco Civic Center. Hardly a day goes by that some new proposal for this area is not discussed by the Board of Supervisors or by the municipal, state and federal agencies located there. The pressure and circumstances that create change are at work; the need for added space, the need for new facilities, the problems created by traffic, and the problems created by dispersed and inconveniently located governmental facilities all demand solution, and all require that decisive steps be taken.

The problem, for which a suggested solution is attempted here, is how this inevitable change is going to take place and how it should take place. How is new development to be related to all that has been done before? What direction, physically and esthetically, should this new development take? What are the essential economic and social requirements of this new development? To answer these questions requires some understanding of what has gone before, of what exists now, and of what may occur in the future. To aid in that understanding is, in part, the purpose of this report.

This report presents and describes a plan which is intended only to indicate a possible form for future expansion. Much more detailed study and refinement is necessary to achieve a generally acceptable and tested plan. The preparation and adoption of such a precise plan, however, might be the ounce of foresight that may save San Francisco many tons of regret and many dollars of public expenditure. This saving cannot be claimed for the preliminary type of plan presented here, for it is meant simply to introduce an idea and to elicit public opinion. But this preliminary plan does show the type of thinking that must be done if haphazard construction and great dissatisfaction are not to follow. It may give rise to intelligent discussion and bring forth suggested alternatives; and if the time is ripe, as it seems to be now, it may result in constructive action.

No matter how much the final result may differ from the point of departure, the production of a definite plan will be aided by the presentation of introductory ideas. If San Francisco is further stimulated to move toward a definite plan for the new Civic Center, this report will have served its primary purpose.

## I. WHAT WE HAVE: THE EXISTING CIVIC CENTER

The existing Civic Center was built on the basis of a plan prepared in 1911. A decision was made necessary at that time because the Panama-Pacific International Exposition was to be held in 1915. The post-earthquake city could scarcely serve as host to the nation and the world with an ugly hole where its administrative center should have been.

An \$8,800,000 Civic Center Bond Issue was passed in 1912 providing for a new City Hall and for the acquisition of additional property in the Civic Center area for other public buildings. The area designated was bounded by Market Street, Golden Gate Avenue, Van Ness Avenue and Hayes Street. A plan was prepared for the city by John Galen Howard, Frederick Meyer and John Reid, which for the greater part has been carried out (See Plate 1). The City Hall, designed by Arthur Brown, Jr., and John Bakewell, Jr., was begun in 1913 and occupied in December of 1915. Other buildings in the Civic Center -- the Civic Auditorium, the Library, the State and Federal buildings, the Opera House and the Veterans Memorial Building, and the Health Center Building -- were added over a period spanning the years 1914 (Civic Auditorium) to 1933 (Health Center Building and Federal Building).

The auditorium cost \$1,300,000 and was built with funds provided by the Panama-Pacific Exposition Company. At the close of the exposition the building and land reverted to the city without added cost, although an additional amount of money was spent by the City to face the building with granite.

The Public Library was built on the site of the old City Hall, "The City Hall Reservation of 1870," and was completed in 1917 at a cost of \$1,100,000. The War Memorial Group cost \$6,125,000 and was built on land acquired by public subscription in 1919 and 1920. The buildings were financed by a bond issue approved in 1932. The State Building and the Federal Building were both built on sites donated by the City.

The Civic Center plan prepared by the consulting architects, Howard, Meyer and Reid, was not as extensive as the present existing development. In the plan an opera house was placed in the vacant property called Marshall Square opposite the library and facing the Plaza. Buildings placed in the plan at the four corners of the Plaza have not been realized except the Health Center Building at Polk and Grove Streets. The existing power house conforms to the plan in position but should occupy its entire lot to balance the other corners. No development other than a semicircular place at the end of Fulton Street was indicated in the plan west of Van Ness Avenue where the War Memorial group now stands.



All this was planned just before the large-scale production and use of the automobile -- the machine that was destined to create the greatest change in cities and in theories of urban development since the abandonment of defensive walls.

### The Concept of the 1911 Plan

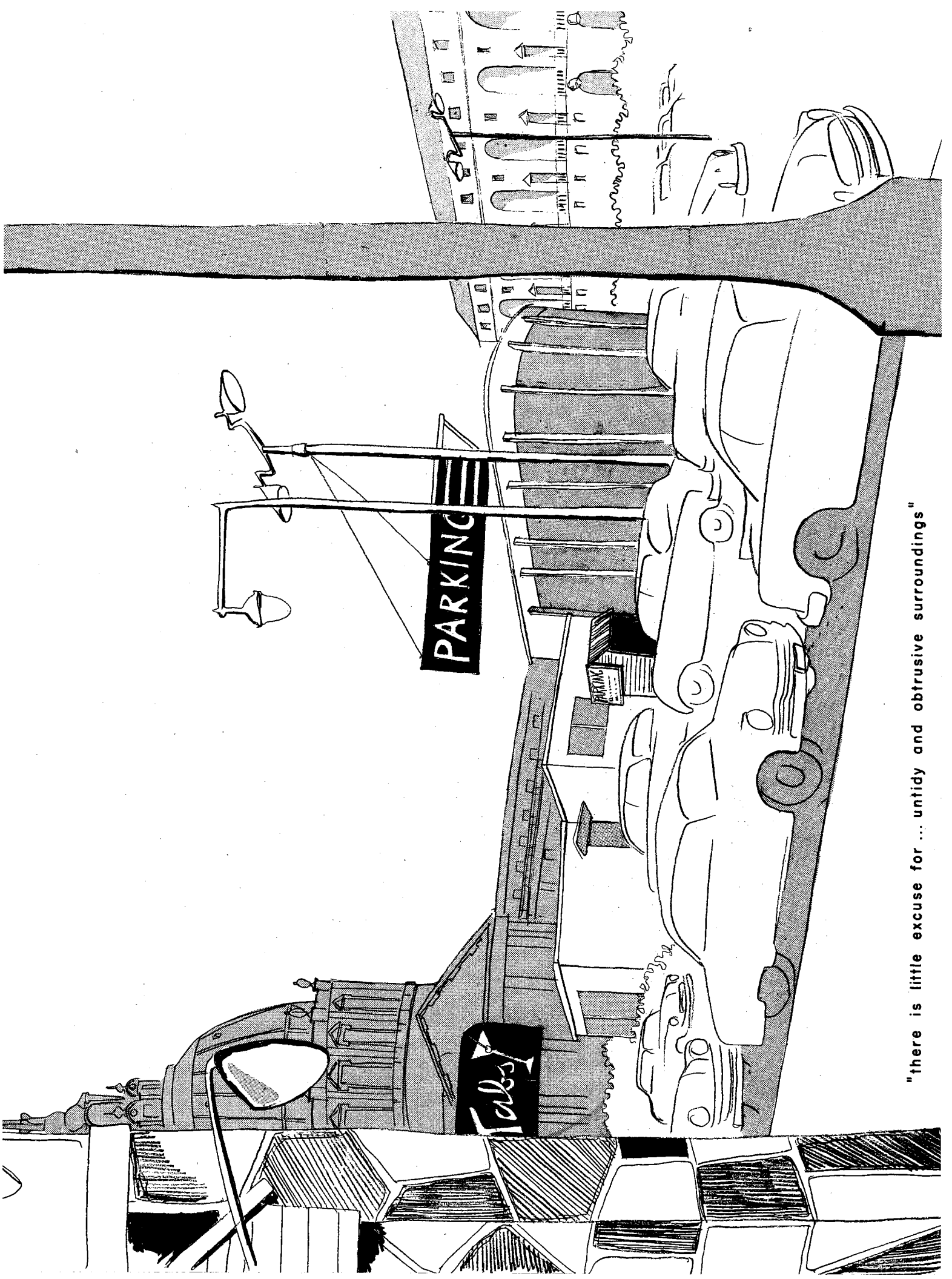
The Civic Center was built at a time when the search for a native architectural style had hardly begun. It was built at a time when the greatest achievement in civic reconstruction, the opening of the boulevards of Paris by Haussmann, was still fresh and accepted uncritically as the model for all civic building endeavors.

The 1911 plan, stated most simply, consists of a number of handsome monumental buildings grouped around an open plaza and approached at one side by a wide boulevard two blocks in length. The buildings, their balanced arrangement and the neat, geometrical planting in the plaza all spring from and are adaptations of French Renaissance themes and styles.

A formal composition of this sort demands the utmost control of all its component elements: architecture, planting, surface embellishments and surroundings. It is meant to be an expression of authority, civic authority in this case. It is intended to impress and overawe.

One may well ask why this particular style was used, not only here but everywhere in the nation at the time, to house the democratic institutions of local, state and federal government. Here informality, an absence of total authority and a tradition of laissez-faire particularly strong in San Francisco would seem to suggest a different kind of treatment, a style somewhat less paradoxical. In answer one can cite the very strong reaction, sweeping the nation at the time, to the ugliness and chaos of fast-growing American cities and the fact that no indigenous style of governmental architecture had developed since Jefferson was the nation's most influential planner, architect and politician.

Although no one contemplates tearing down the existing palatial structures of the Civic Center, the question arises, when new buildings and extensions are found necessary, whether rigid conformity to an already too rigid development is a proper solution to the problem. If there is one thing that the 1911 plan lacks it is provision for changing and adaptable space.



"there is little excuse for ... untidy and obtrusive surroundings"

On the basis of functional requirements too, the Civic Center is subject to criticism. Palaces and office buildings offer two distinctly different architectural problems. American architects have made brilliant solutions to the latter problem, but no one has ever solved the problem of making a suitable office building out of a palace or a building that looks like a palace. The City Hall is quite effective as a showplace, as a place to receive important people in a dignified setting. But as a place for carrying out the routine official activities of municipal government it leaves much to be desired. For one thing, it cannot be enlarged without destroying its architectural integrity. The same may be said of the Federal Building and the Civic Auditorium. To all intents and purposes these buildings are static, and the space they contain is not always arranged to benefit those working in the buildings or those who visit them on business.

A further difficulty arises out of the fact that this group of buildings was set down on a gridiron street pattern which very severely limits the size of the building areas, and, what is worse, allows a stream of traffic to flow across every part of the area. The buildings, rather than forming at all times an harmonious group, more often seem to be separated by noisy streams of traffic or glistening lines of parked cars. One cannot criticize the original designers for not taking traffic into account but the allocation of so much space for streets, especially at a time when the exigencies of traffic were in no way so great as now, has resulted in a tremendous loss in intimacy and scale.

Since the effect of the design was considered more important than such utilitarian matters as economy of materials, construction methods, convenience and comfort there is little excuse for having allowed the whole Civic Center to be seriously damaged by untidy and obtrusive surroundings. This is not to suggest that control of adjacent private property could have been exercised then any more easily than it can now, and the criticism is made in full knowledge that the original plan has not been entirely filled out. The fact is, however, that under the best of circumstances the Center as planned was not sufficiently insulated. The acquisition of a very large amount of surrounding land was then and still is out of the question; and the absolute control of the adjacent frontages is neither possible nor probably desirable. But the gaps in the present Center made by straight streets and open lots destroy the sense of splendid isolation that this style of formal design requires.

In these circumstances it would seem that the style selected was a vulnerable one considering its own requirements and the difficulty of fulfilling them in a typical American city where economics has so much to do with the development of private property.

## Summary

To sum up, then, it can be said of the existing Civic Center that, taken individually, its buildings are handsome and exceptionally faithful reproductions of a style of monumental architecture. The style adopted, while partially fulfilling the purpose of creating a dignified setting for government activity, is not particularly well suited to the operations housed in the center. The over-all effect of the buildings is reduced by an excessive amount of street area and the interruption of traffic. The buildings themselves are not easily subject to expansion. And, finally, the center is not sufficiently insulated from its surroundings.