



THE SAN FRANCISCO CIVIC CENTER:  
A STUDY IN URBAN FORM

OCTOBER 1987

URBAN DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SAN FRANCISCO'S CIVIC CENTER  
UNDERTAKEN BY  
THE URBAN DESIGN COMMITTEE  
AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS • SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER

DEVELOPED IN CONJUNCTION WITH  
THE SAN FRANCISCO DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING  
&  
THE CIVIC DESIGN COMMITTEE • SAN FRANCISCO ARTS COMMISSION

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• PREFACE / ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS •

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The report presented herein is the culmination of a design charrette undertaken to reawaken public interest /civic spirit in the Civic Center Area. The goal of this study is to facilitate the completion of a world-class civic center begun in the early 20th century. The vision of this special urban place and the current physical form is the combined efforts and talents of many individuals. With sensitive reinforcement ,we believe the vision of civic leaders, nearly 80 years ago, can be fully realized. It is our hope that this study can act as a catalyst in evolving this vision and that the continued completion of this great civic composition is accomplished.

The charrette study took place on the 13, 14 , 22 and 23 of July 1987. We wish to acknowledge the valued participation of the following individuals:

Clark Manus, Chairperson  
Alex Bonutti, Steering Committee  
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• EXECUTIVE SUMMARY •

OVERALL GOAL

- Enhance the Civic Center as a setting for cultural and government activities providing opportunities for every citizen to utilize the district as a community resource.

PLANNING RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide for a continued focus and diversity of government office, retail and cultural activities to maintain the Civic Center as a safe and active area both during the day and evening.
- Review the balance of cultural activities citywide identifying the role of the Civic Center as a cultural district.
- Locate additional cultural and evening activities on the east side of the plaza to facilitate wider use of the Civic Center as a cultural district.
- Expand government and cultural facilities within the Civic Center district in priority sites as identified in this report.

URBAN DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

- Complete and restore the original 1912 Civic Center master plan in concept providing a formal Civic Center composition and character for the district.
- Enhance the definition of the Civic Center as a distinct district utilizing a stronger streetscape, open space framework and architectural guidelines that build on the characteristics of the classical core buildings.
- Improve the arrival experience at the Civic Center MUNI/BART stations by posturing future development on the south side of Market street toward United Nations Plaza.

URBAN DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reintroduce traffic along the Fulton Street Mall to improve access, activate the mall and improve the arrival experience to the Civic Center.

ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

- Maintain the existing perceived height and scale of the classical core area.
- Select materials for the infill civic center buildings that are similar in nobility, color and relief as the classical core buildings.
- Compose the infill buildings' elevations in the context of the adjacent classical tri-partite facades.
- Consider Proposition K requirements for the public open space in the important context of completing the Civic Centers' established formal Beaux Arts design.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- Fund and execute a comprehensive design and facilities plan for the Civic Center district to realize the center's opportunities to unite the diverse and civic elements of the city.
- Budget and implement a formal open space and streetscape master plan for the Civic Center district to provide the necessary setting for community and cultural events and enhance the traditional role of the area as a place for government and culture.

• CONTEXT •  
Background

## SCOPE OF STUDY

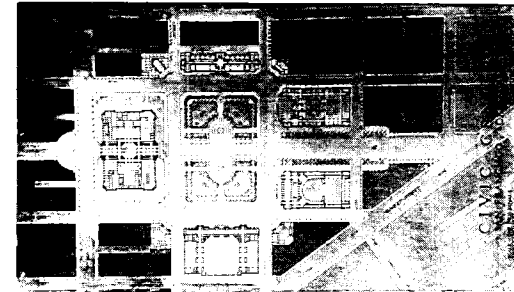
The focus of this study is the analysis of and suggestions for the physical form of the study area, an area that includes not only the core area that is traditionally considered the Civic Center, but also the areas adjacent to it.

## PURPOSE

The intent of this study is not to suggest specific uses for the various components of the Civic Center; but, rather, to focus on the more general issues which define the physical form of the Civic Center Area, and suggest ways of enhancing the vitality of the Civic Center.

The study addresses not only the historic core but also adjacent areas because it is the belief of the participants that the experience and use of the Civic Center must be viewed within the larger context of the surrounding city.

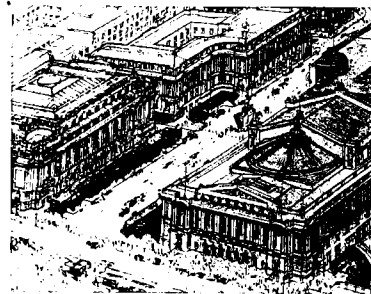
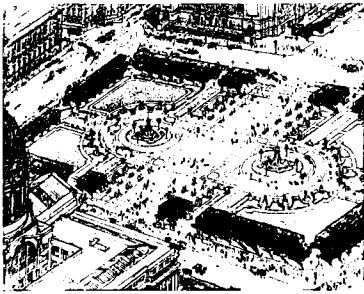
It is hoped that this study will serve as the basis for consideration of the Civic Center study area described herein as a zoning district, and lead to the preparation of District Guidelines that serve as a mechanism to assist the realization of the vision of a Civic Center that is based on a respect for the past, present consideration of the disparate needs of the city's inhabitants, and an understanding of this area's role in molding the future.



## HISTORY

The rich history of the San Francisco's Civic Center grew from the "City Beautiful" movement spawned by the 1893 Chicago World Fair to create an organized center of civic buildings. The 1906 earthquake leveled the newly completed City Hall and created the opportunity to explore a grand plan such as the 1905 Burnham plan. The reform government of James Rolph in 1912 put the development of a civic center at the forefront of city policy, including the Panama-Pacific Exposition. Initial plans by John Galen Howard, Fred Meyer and John Reed Jr. called for the dome of City Hall to be on axis with both Fulton and Eighth Streets placing City Hall on the east side of the plaza. Part way through the competition, the City Hall was interchanged with the Opera House and Library creating a grand entrance to the Civic Center. The original designers recognized that to properly define such a large plaza, great strength and unity of design were required. All fronting buildings were given bold colonnades as were the identical four corner buildings. Constructed in 1915, in time for the Exposition, the plaza became a central ceremonial way following the visual axis along Fulton Street, flanked by the two fountains on the cross axis of the State and the Exposition (Civic Auditorium) Buildings. The Bakewell & Brown designed City Hall opened later that year. The George Kelham designed Library was built in 1917 amid some hint of impropri-

• CONTEXT •  
Background



ety due to its resemblance to other public libraries. The State Office Building, by Bliss and Faville, was completed in 1926 after two years of delays resulting from City-State land swaps, World War I, and criticism of the design which departed from the horizontal divisions and characteristics that united the other buildings. The expanse of blank walls along the Fulton and Hyde Street sides of the 1926 Orpheum Theatre directed the city to buy a ten inch setback to construct a proper facade. But, with the 1929 Stock Market Crash and mismanagement of funds set aside for the project, the walls have since remained blank.

Efforts to build an opera house and museum were reactivated, in effect protecting City Hall from inappropriate neighbors to the west. The American Legion was brought in as a partner in the creation of the War Memorial in addition to assisting with the fund raising. The site provided the needed space for an expanded program and extended the formal frame of the Civic Center. The Health Building, at the corner of Polk and Grove Streets, remains the only corner building built, though it is not as strong as suggested in the master plan. The old Federal Building on Fulton Street, completed in 1935, was the last project within the Civic Center managed by Mayor Rolph. To secure appropriate development, the site was not turned over to the Federal Government until the Mayor was given satisfactory proof that the building would conform to the other Civic Center buildings. The depression, the retirement of Mayor Rolph, and

the demands of WWII brought active work on the Civic Center to a close for a period of almost twenty years.

With the Civic Center Plan of 1953, the formal arrangement along the Fulton axis was partially abandoned in favor of a more open and irregular pattern. Development brought the central freeway across the Fulton axis on the west, blocking views from and towards City Hall and limiting the extension of public services in that direction. Between the 1953 plan proposal and the officially adopted plan of 1958, Brooks Hall and a parking garage were placed under James Rolph Plaza. The Plaza by Douglas Bayliss retained many of the qualities of the original design while adding more trees, hedges and flowers to create more wind protected seating. But eventually, a reflecting pool was added, interrupting the ceremonial pathway.

The 1958 plan, a joint venture by Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons and Skidmore Owings & Merrill, called for the expansion of exposition facilities, the construction of four, nearly block sized, parking garages, and the extension of the complex to the north. Elaborate new open spaces around the 1962 Federal Building, designed by John Carl Warnecke & Associates, became unusable due to the severe wind problems in the area. In the 1960s, the 1953 idea of introducing greater informality in the arrangement of buildings was abandoned. With the construction of BART and the use of Federal funds, the city implemented the proposal to create a one block mall and plaza where Fulton meets Market Street.

Recent additions to the Civic Center include Davies Hall, to the south of the Opera House, and the equally monumental State Office Building, north of the War Memorial Complex. Both buildings, by Skidmore Owings & Merrill, face the reentrant corner of City Hall. The heart of the Civic Center remains incomplete while major public structures have been added to the periphery. The chance of realizing the visual unity of the central composition is still possible today.

• CONTEXT •  
Urban Design Analysis

## EXISTING COMPOSITION

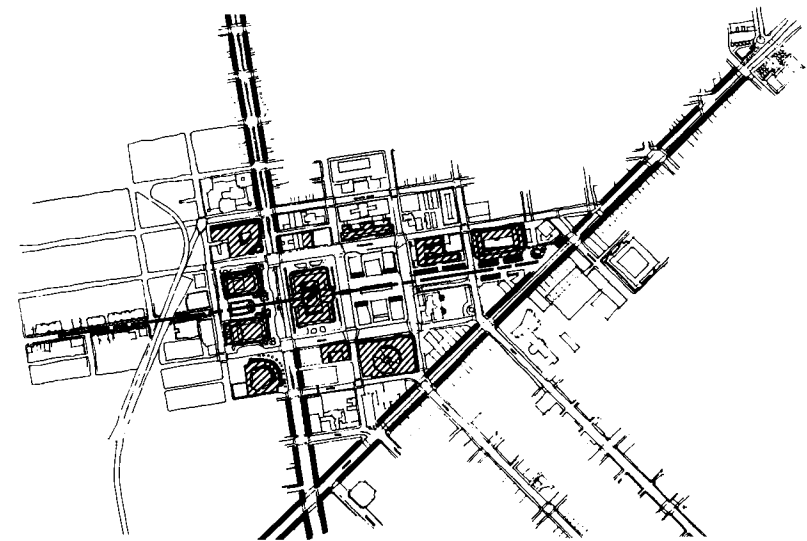
The classical, pre-1930s buildings that surround the Civic Center plaza are the core of the original Beaux Arts plan. It is the collection of buildings that make the Civic Center distinct in San Francisco, the formal bridge between Market Street and Van Ness Avenue. The following points summarize key observations about the existing urban design composition:

- The 1960's plaza and government buildings lack the subtle secondary compositional plan elements of the 1912 plan.
- The international style plaza design does not respond to the existing north-south or diagonal circulation patterns.
- The City Hall axis resolution at Market street is weak. It is too open and without a deliberate street wall. Fulton Street and U.N. Plaza are ill-defined.
- Van Ness Avenue provides a strong formal interface between the district and points north and south.

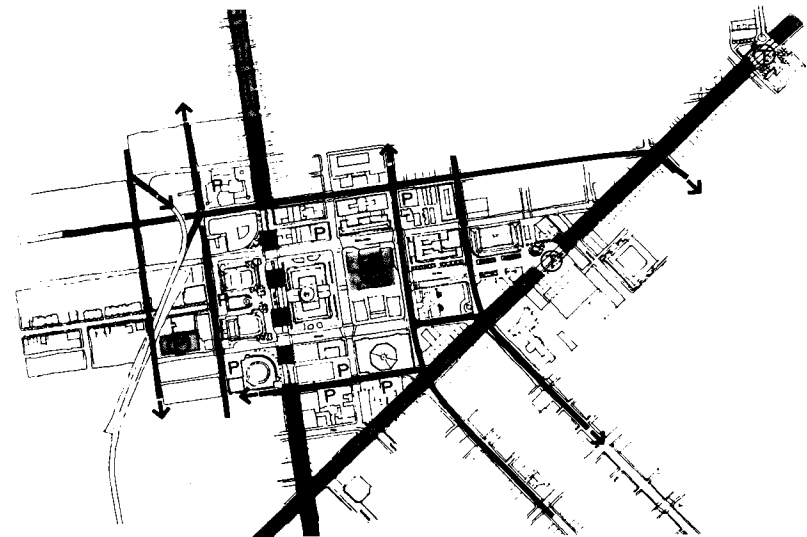
## VEHICULAR CIRCULATION

A review of vehicular circulation yielded the following observations:

- Most vehicular circulation paths near the Civic Center are oriented to divert traffic around the Center's Core.
- Paths that do penetrate the core are configured to facilitate movement primarily in a north/south direction.
- McAllister provides the only direct east/west path through the core.
- The Fulton Street right-of-way, the central east/west axis through the Civic Center, is closed to through traffic east of Civic Center Plaza.
- Most of the traffic on streets adjacent to the area is routed as a series of one way couples.
- Several of these couples accommodate the transition between the wider South of Market and the tighter North of Market street grids.
- The Eighth/Ninth Street couple fails to enhance the experience of entering the Civic Center Core. North bound traffic enters at the rear of the Civic Auditorium complex, adjacent to the loading dock. South bound traffic exiting is diverted around Pioneer Monument, diminishing its importance as a historic landmark in the area.



COMPOSITION



VEHICULAR CIRCULATION

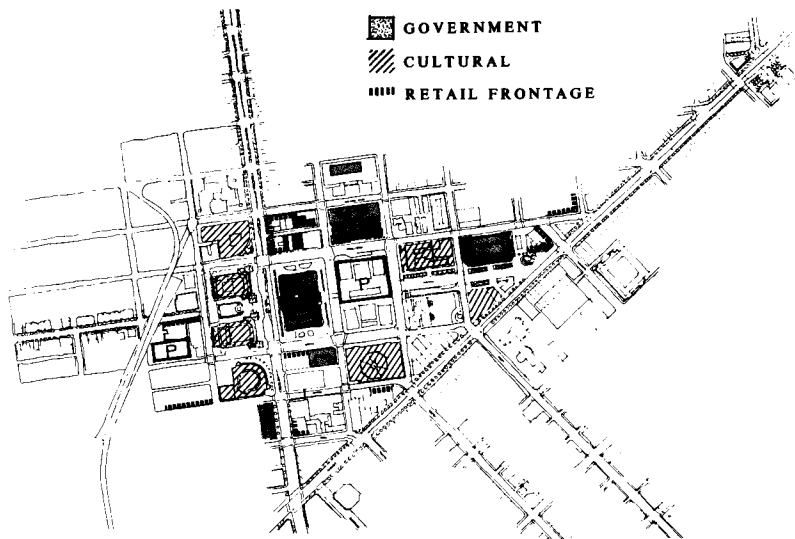
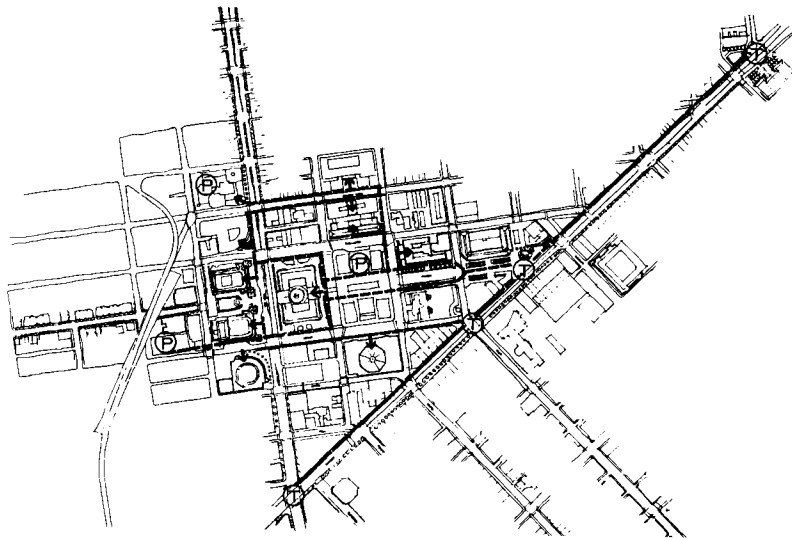
• CONTEXT •  
Urban Design Analysis

### PEDESTRIAN CIRCULATION

An analysis of pedestrian movement within the Civic Center has led to the following conclusions:

- Primary flow occurs in the east/west direction.
- During the day, the heaviest flow is between the Market Street BART/MUNI stations, available parking areas and government facilities surrounding the Civic Center Plaza.
- North/South flow is limited, for the most part, to destinations between facilities within the Civic Center.
- At night, the heaviest flow continues in an east/west direction, though most of it occurs west of Larkin, between Brooks Hall and its parking facilities, the Performing Arts Complex and the Cultural Facilities on the west side of Van Ness.
- Partly due to the lack of activity along the Fulton Street right-of-way between UN Plaza and the Civic Center Plaza, this portion of the pedestrian path is not heavily used at night.
- The configuration of the open space components in the Civic Center, such as crosswalks and the design of the plaza, does not facilitate east/west pedestrian movement

### PEDESTRIAN CIRCULATION



### EXISTING ACTIVITIES

### EXISTING ACTIVITIES

The Civic Center is the focal point of government and some cultural activities for the city. This district also provides the backdrop for citywide gatherings, whether political, cultural or civic. Related and support services are located at the district's edges. The Civic Center's areas include:

- The diverse activity core of Van Ness between City Hall, Davies Hall, the War Memorial Complex, and the State Building.
- Government offices are represented in the Civic Center, though not centralized. Workers are not served by retail outlets, typical of other districts in the city.
- The Plaza and other open space provide for city-wide functions, including parades, rallies, and a temporary market. Individual users encounter a social and physical environment that can be controlled by territoriality.
- The eastern portion of the Civic Center, lacks diverse day and evening activities. Other than special events and the market, this area is not utilized by local workers. At night, it is avoided altogether.



• CONTEXT •  
Architectural Analysis

### EXISTING BUILDING FORM ANALYSIS

As an urban area, the Civic Center Core buildings are different from the rest of the city. The common expression of the buildings strengthens the comprehension of the Civic Center as a **place** rather than a collection of buildings. At the most general level, the heights, widths, massing and distribution of the built volumes in the area are related to one other. These volumes are of three general types, (1) those that stretch the full length of city blocks on the east/west axis, (2) those that define the 'corners' of the principal open space and (3) those buildings that straddle the city's street grid (City Hall). All of these types have comparable heights of between 72-86 feet, including the base portion of City Hall.

More specifically, all the buildings have a uniform architectural style: the 'heroic' or 'civic' Beaux-Arts style, and a uniform palette of building materials. Buildings outside the core area, whether visible from it or not, are dissimilar in either style, material selection or both.

The diagrams on the adjacent page summarize some of the principles that define the treatment of the facades of the existing buildings in this area. They are derived from an overlay of all the primary buildings within the core area. These principles include:

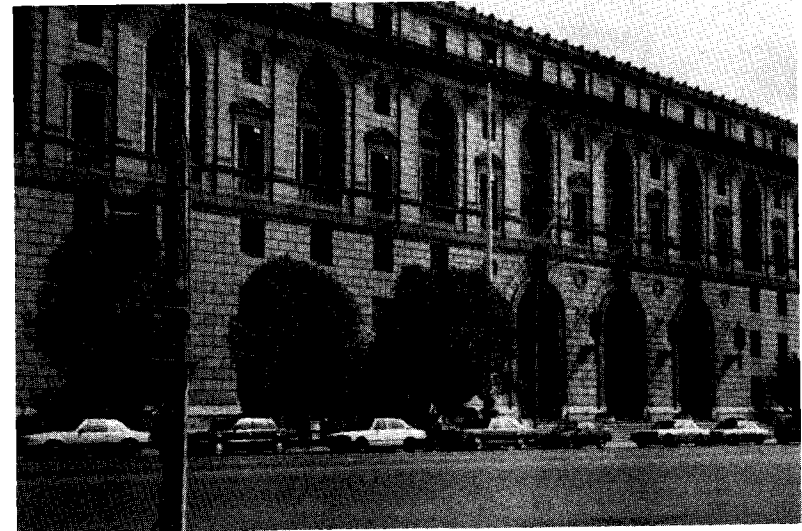
#### Principles:

- Axial entry at the center of the east/west facades.
- A plinth that accomodates the natural slope of the land.
- A deep, horizontally rusticated base ranging from 19'6" to 31'6" in which openings are recessed a maximum of 1'8", and occupy a maximum of 20% of the surface.
- A shaft between 33'6" and 45'6" in height, with vertically oriented solids and voids at least 2'6" deep, with a maximum of 50% surface in openings.

- A cornice line at about 65'0" in height.
- A 'capital' of about 15'0" in height, with a non-directional pattern and a maximum of 60% in voids, the voids being a maximum of 8" deep.
- A mansard roof, where appropriate, whose slope aligns with the angle from the floor at the midpoint of the entry to the top of the 'capital' band.

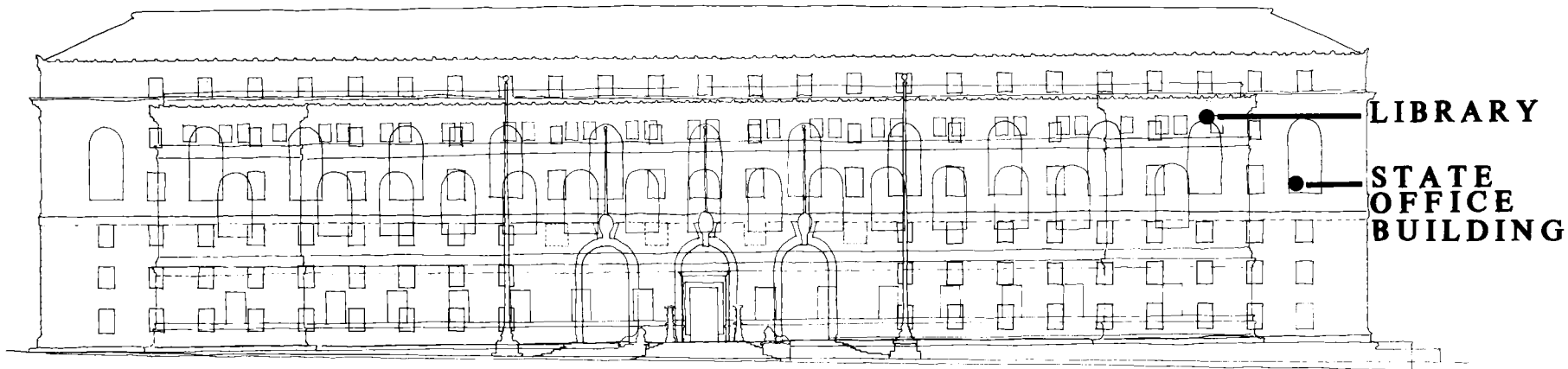
#### Materials:

- Plinths of predominantly gray granite with gray limestone above.
- Terne coated or colored metal work with clear or grey tinted glazing.

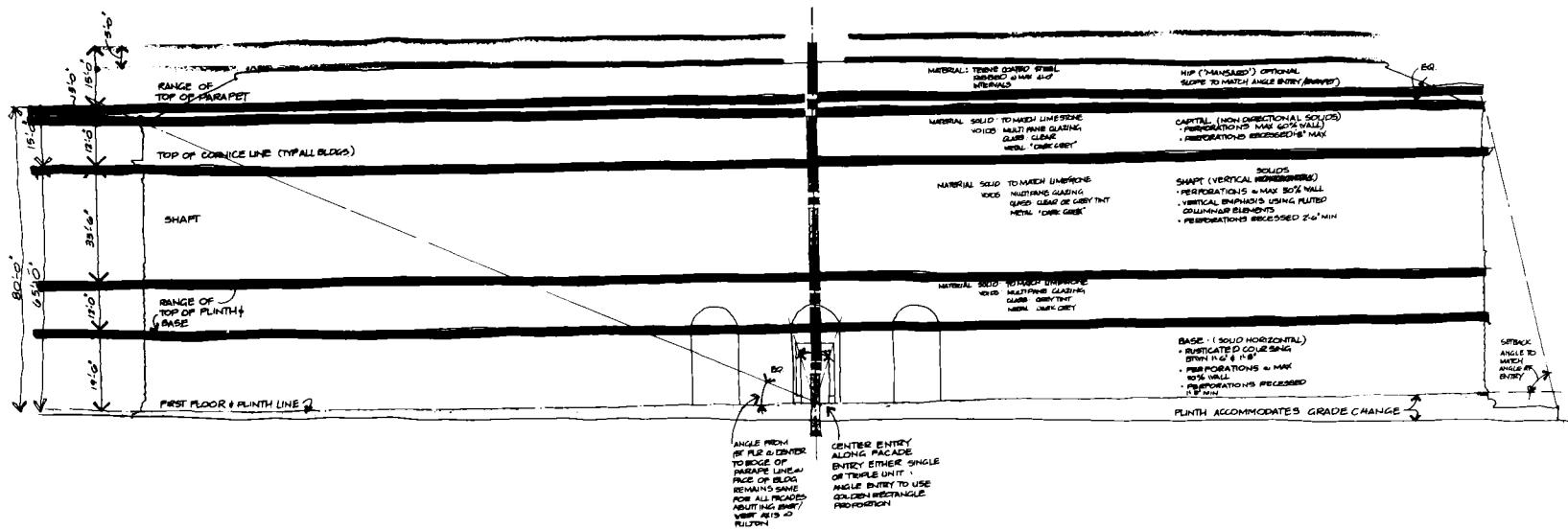


STATE OFFICE BUILDING

• CONTEXT •  
Architectural Analysis



### FACADE ANALYSIS Range of Deviation



### EXISTING BUILDING ANALYSIS East-West Facades

