

## DESIGN MATTERS

# Counting the Last Days of Paul Rudolph's Blue Cross Coverage

By Jeff Stein

**E**ACH NEW GENERATION HOPES TO MAKE ITS mark on the city. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and his first-time developer, Atlanta's Steve Belkin, say they hope to mark up the Hub with a new thousand-foot tower at Winthrop Square, although losing their architect Renzo Piano is a serious setback to this plan.

The trouble is that Menino's idea for an 80-story skyscraper is not part of any new generation. In truth, the mayor and the idea of a skyscraper are both part of our grandparents' generation. Not only that, but the Menino-Belkin skyscraper plan calls for demolition of a really exceptional background building at 133 Federal St. — technologically important, constructed to an understandable urban scale, designed at a time when the mayor really was a member of the new generation.

The Blue Cross office building (its entrance currently sports the sign "Trans National," the name of Belkin's property management company) was designed in 1960 by architect Paul Rudolph. Rudolph went on to create other buildings in Boston — he designed the sculptural and somewhat too-rugged State Services building near Government Center and expressively restored First Church in Boston's Back Bay. He became for seven years the dean of Yale University's School of Architecture, designing Yale's controversial Art and Architecture building; and in the last portion of his career (he died in 1997) he oversaw an international practice, creating a series of large, dynamic public buildings across Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

But in Boston, in 1960, Rudolph was still

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experimenting. He was best known then for a series of lovely modernist houses around Sarasota, Fla. — spare and efficient, all light and shade, fresh air and natural ventilation. The Blue Cross building shares some of those characteristics, especially the efficiency.

Jason Hart suggests the glory of the Blue Cross building lies in how Rudolph was able to create such flexible, efficient interior space. Hart is a young graduate architect and partner in the Boston design firm CUBE design + research. He also teaches at the Boston Architectural College and once worked for Piano. He points out how Rudolph moved the building's structural system and ventilation system away from its interior walls and columns (there are none) and located them in the building's exterior 3-dimensional façade. That façade is constructed of complex pre-cast concrete, a marvel of 1960 technology. It disguises the building's systems in plain sight. This active façade, Hart notes, "is one of the earliest precursors of High-Tech Modernism, a movement whose climax was Renzo Piano's Centre Pompidou" in Paris. Boston architecture comes full circle.

## Intimate Space

By late morning, the New England sun — even this early in April — makes its way to the umbrella-ed tables around the Blue Cross building's outdoor café, warmly reflecting off Rudolph's 3-dimensional façade. It's not harsh or glaring, as sunlight might be when glancing off a thinner, broader glassy surface. Instead it is playful, light broken up by the building's thick vertical concrete ribs and wide, horizontal windowsills. The effect is as if sun is shining through a leafy forest. It results in just the sort of intimate public space that a city cannot have too many examples of, and it is this particular one that the Menino-Belkin project seems intent on eras-

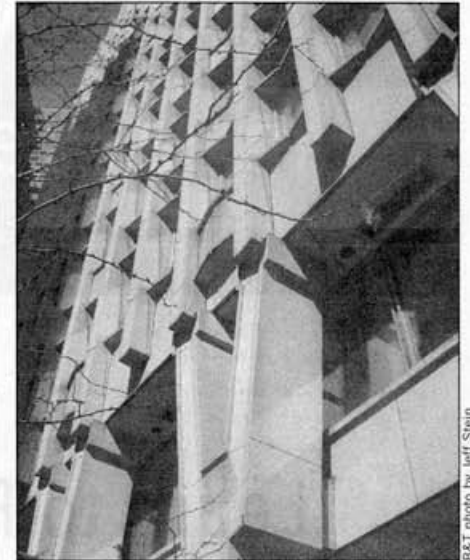
ing from our collective memory.

But the Blue Cross building's façade, comprised of a breakthrough technology, is an important part of Boston's history. Information (and several million British Thermal Units of embodied energy) is contained in its material that we would like to save, to remember.

The question then is precisely how to save the memory of this building, not how to save the building itself. Given the political (the mayor) and economic (a billion dollars of new construction) forces at work here, if the project does go ahead the Rudolph building as a whole seems unlikely to be saved. Still, Belkin has not presented a compelling argument for demolishing it, and two weeks ago the Boston Landmarks Commission granted the Blue Cross office building a 90-day stay of execution.

At that meeting, Hart placed ideas about preserving the significance of the Blue Cross building into the commission's record. He suggested four ways of thinking about remembering Rudolph's work, including the usual gutting of the building while preserving the façade; saving a portion of the façade and integrating it into the new development; or perhaps somehow interpreting a portion of the building in the new project. And then Hart suggested a fourth way: dissecting the building in the manner of artist Gordon Matta-Clark.

Matta-Clark produced a series of artworks in the 1970s, known as "building cuts," in which he literally cut through old buildings, exposing their edges and materials and revealing precisely how they were made in the first place. His most famous work took place when he made a spiraling cone-shaped cut through two apartment buildings slated for demolition to make way for Piano's Centre Pompidou in Paris. This project was filmed, of course, and the resulting work has preserved the memory



B&T photo by Jeff Stein

**The Blue Cross office building at 133 Federal St. in Boston includes architect Paul Rudolph's high-tech 3-dimensional building facade, constructed of pre-cast concrete, which contains all vertical structural systems and all ventilating systems.**

of those buildings in a way that their construction actually survives in the consciousness of whoever witnesses the film.

The same could happen to the Blue Cross building. A physical remnant of Paul Rudolph's technologically groundbreaking façade could even be removed in this way, in a kind of public celebration of architecture, and be placed in the new construction, or in a museum or school of architecture. The main thing is that preservation in Boston doesn't have to be all or nothing. In the case of Rudolph's Blue Cross building, especially, it is the design of the historically significant façade itself that is the landmark.

Is there a way for us to remember it? Bostonians have less than 90 days to decide. ■