



Planning Civic Engagement: Town Halls and Public Space Revisited

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The town hall as a building type is under-studied. With the exception of Mary P. Ryan's article, "A Laudable Pride in the Whole of Us": City Halls and Civic Materialism," little work has been done to investigate the town hall's architectural role in the polity of its locale. A myriad question append to this building type: Why, and under what circumstances, does government establish its presence in the space of the urban landscape? Several of the examples presented at the Chicago meeting of the IPHS two years ago indicated that even in a democracy the town hall is not a space exclusively dedicated to civic engagement. Where, then, is civic engagement located? In many cases, this building type seems intended to serve as a focus of the civic realm, an often complex architectural and iconological narrative better suited as a visual landmark than a space of contact between the public and its government. How vital is this didactic self-reflection in a democratic landscape, or does it suggest limits otherwise disguised? This first presentation will review last meeting's roundtable discussion that included nineteenth century town halls in Baltimore, New Orleans, New York, and Calcutta, and the twentieth century examples in Los Angeles, Helsinki and Stockholm, and provide the research context within which to locate the specific case studies to follow.

KEY WORDS: Public space, town halls, civic life, public sphere.