

Death by Preservation

Paul Rudolph's Blue Cross and Blue Shield Building

Testimony to the Boston Landmarks Commission | March 13, 2007 | Jason Hart, CUBE

Regarding the proposed demolition of Paul Rudolph's Blue Cross and Blue Shield Building (ill. 1) to make way for an 80-story tower designed by Renzo Piano.

As a former employee of the Renzo Piano Building Workshop in Paris, and having been educated under the auspicious influence of Paul Rudolph successors in Florida, I'm compelled to reconsider the proposed demolition of Rudolph's Blue Cross and Blue Shield office building (BC-BS) at 133 Federal Street, Boston. Before condemning the building to death by wrecking ball, it's worth considering its place within the work of architect Paul Rudolph, its architectural legacy, its current life within the city, and its possible future as a diminutive neighbor to the Piano skyscraper. In a larger context, it begs the question – how should we preserve architecturally significant buildings once the urban landscape has outgrown them?

Before Paul Rudolph was a known brutalist, he was a regional modernist. His work began on the central west coast of Florida where he and Ralph Twitchell founded the influential Sarasota School of Architecture (1941-1966), which was characterized by its response to climate and terrain, its innovative ventilation systems, and its structural experimentation. From 1957-1960, Rudolph's body of work shifted from Florida to New England and became increasingly influenced by Le Corbusier's later brutalist works. However, the BC-BS building neither fully embodies the ideals of brutalism nor Sarasota School; conceived in 1957, it is very much a transitional building in the work of Paul Rudolph.



ill. 1 - Blue Cross and Blue Shield Building - Paul Rudolph

The building's architectural legacy lies mainly in its innovative façade. Rudolph's design problem was a simple office building that needed to be planned for the maximum flexibility of space. He accomplished this by using a two-way floor slab, giving him the ability to move the better part of the building's vertical structure to the façade. He further freed the interior by integrating a traditionally horizontal ventilation system within the vertical façade structure (ill. 2). With this complexity, he also pushed forward the pre-cast façade technologies of the day. Ironically, by putting the building systems on the façade, Rudolph put the BC-BS building in the history books as one of the earliest (and most forgotten) precursors to the 1970's high-tech modernism – a movement whose climax was Renzo Piano's seminal Centre Pompidou. The building may not be a pivotal example of a particular style or an ism, but it is one-of-a-kind. Many buildings have been preserved for far less noteworthy reasons.

On a more practical level, it's still a working office space, and its ground floor still offers public functions and urban space to city dwellers.

The small plaza is crowded in the summer, and at lunch I often stand in long lines at the eateries beneath the building. Of all its neighbors, the BC-BS building is the only one to offer texture, public space, and a human scale to its immediate surroundings.

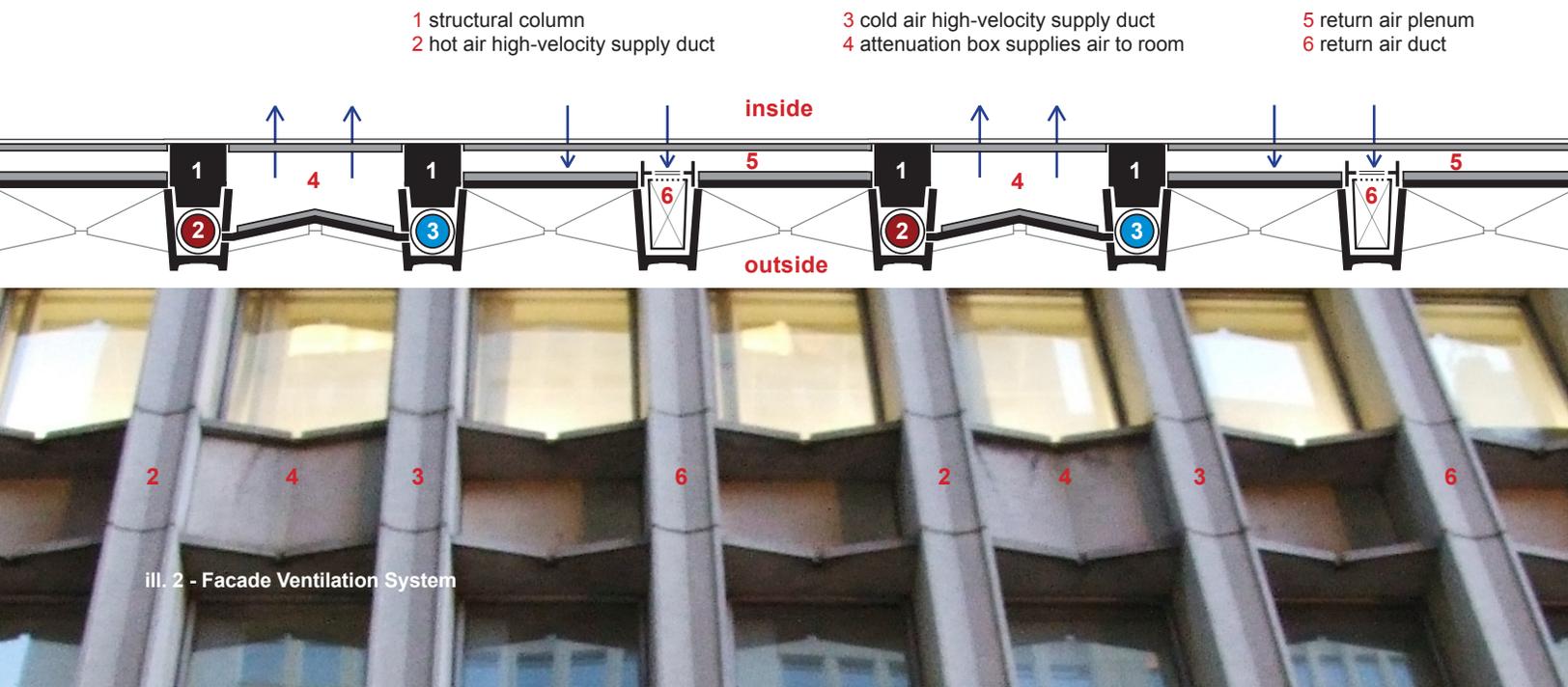
Despite this, I realize that cities are dynamic and living things. Boston is certainly no exception. The BC-BS building is now dwarfed in height and density by its neighbors. Some have argued this little

building would be a good neighbor to Piano's tower because of the ideas it shares with the Centre Pompidou. This idea is nice in theory, but realistically, the general public will make no visible connection between the two buildings. In fact, imagining it next to Piano's 1,000 foot tower is almost comical. Has the city outgrown this little building? Perhaps. And perhaps its loss is not so great in comparison to what we will be gaining with Renzo Piano's design.

I view preservation in the broadest sense of the word, and it is clear to me that this building has enough importance to be preserved in some way. The building has been long forgotten by the public, and most people, including architects, do not know of its historical significance, because, unlike the Pompidou, its systems are well-disguised in plain sight. Unfortunately, we are only reminded of its value and its creator because of its scheduled demise. Architecture is a public conversation. It is the stuff of life and experience - created, changed, and destroyed by human need and desire. Ultimately, preserving a building in its initial state may not be the kindest fate. In this case, I would argue that leaving the building fully intact would further condemn it to obscurity. But perhaps there is a way that the building's primary architectural value - its façade - could be preserved. This could be accomplished in several ways:

1. The building is gutted and the façade partially or holistically maintained as an archeological remnant – similar to Norman Foster's new Hearst Building in New York. But in this situation, the scales of the old and new have no relationship.
2. Some portion of the façade is moved out of place and displayed or integrated in the new development.
3. The building is erased, but Piano offers some conceptual interpretation in the project that keeps the spirit of this building alive.
4. We reevaluate the idea of physical preservation by honoring the building in the style of the artist Gordon Matta-Clark (ill. 3). By dissecting the building, perhaps we can turn its historical significance into something tangible and educational. By documenting this act through diagram, photograph, video, text, and physical remnant in the plaza or in a museum, this building's ingenuity and architectural legacy would survive, and in fact, be reborn in public consciousness.

This last act of preservation may actually be the most fitting. In 1975, Gordon Matta-Clark preserved through dissection two apartment buildings demolished to make way for the Centre Pompidou. Matta-Clark's work exposes thin edges of building materials, revealing an autobiographical process of its making. By undoing the building, he opens a state of closure.



What is clear is Rudolph's BC-BS building should not simply be erased from our memory. In a 1986 interview, Paul Rudolph stated that he had always disliked the BC-BS building because it was never tall enough. I would speculate that Rudolph would be neither shocked nor disappointed that his BC-BS office building is being slated for demolition to make way for Renzo Piano. In fact, I think he would approve of his successor, for they share a similar spirit of approach. Despite its creator's opinion, the building's place in history is well-established. It has unfortunately languished in obscurity amidst Boston and architecture's ever-changing landscape. Preservation doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing proposition. Indeed, it would be a shame to waste the opportunity to finally see Rudolph's innovative façade for the landmark it truly is.

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