ARCHITECTURE OF INSANITY

BOSTON GOVERNMENT SERVICE CENTER

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Late modernist master Paul Rudolph's Boston Government Service Center, which encompasses the infamous Erich Lindemann Mental Health Center, is a cautionary tale of a bold and stunning work of art that became an architectural dinosaur. In this article, **Michele Koh** delves into this megastructure's murky past.

Beast of urban renewal

Occupying a superblock on the lowest slope of Beacon Hill in the city of Boston is an imposing concrete building that was, at the time of its conception, intended to be a booming and efficient government metropolis. The Boston Government Service Center (BGSC) was civic design on a massive scale conceived during America's most infamous act of postwar urban renewal—the destruction of Boston's West End in the 1950s, which led to the displacement of almost 63 percent of Boston's working class families. The BGSC was part of a master plan to transform this large sector of the city into a civil service nucleus. Sadly, today, the BGSC is an incomplete, controversial and much neglected Brutalist structure that does not live up to its potential.

The building was designed by former dean of the Yale School of Architecture, the late Paul Marvin Rudolph, whose famous works include the spatially complex Yale Art and Architecture Building, as well as The Concourse and The Colonnade condominium in Singapore. Rudolph, who is known for his Cubist designs and highly complicated floor plans studied under Walter Gropius at Harvard in 1941, where he became part of an elite group of Harvard architecture students along with contemporaries Philip Johnson, John Johansen and Harry Seidler who developed the modernist design culture based on Gropius's teaching of "the democratic design process." Rudolph was the coordinating architect of this project commissioned by the State of Massachusetts, and was assisted by architectural firms M.A. Dyer, Desmond & Lord Inc., and Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson & Abbott. As with many of Rudolph's projects, this massive undertaking began with much praise but has since become the subject of harsh criticism.

The BGSC building comprises two connected parts, the Charles F. Hurley Building, which houses the Division of Unemployment Assistance and other offices of state government, and the Erich Lindemann Mental Health Center, a government psychiatric facility. The structure includes a two-level parking garage that is largely hidden from view. When the building was designed in 1962, the site was designated for three separate services. The plan at the time was for the Departments of Health, Welfare and Education to be housed in a 23-storey tower. Employment and Mental Health services were to be housed in a necklace of buildings surrounding the tower, which would create a courtyard around the outside. However, the 23-storey tower, which was meant to be the heart of the plan was never completed and the scheme veered off course.

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The BGSC, as it stands today, consists of perimeter offices of similar height to the other buildings in the area. Because Boston is a town with strong ties to the sea, Rudolph designed the building as a giant conch shell, with strong nautical motifs like flowing waves and sand that are reflected in the shapes of the public staircases, surface material and hard landscaping. The ensemble was created using the principles of a megastructure with a multi-functional design. It was built to be integrated into the surrounding fabric, so vehicles and pedestrians around the site would be taken into consideration, with the garage serving as an entrance to the complex.

In a 1982 interview in *Architectural Record*, Rudolph said, "The generating ideas of most traditional cities are pedestrian and vehicular circulation, streets, squares, terminuses, with their space clearly defined by buildings. This means linked buildings united to form comprehensible exterior spaces. The BGSC is the opposite of Le Corbusier's dictum 'down with the street.' It started with three separate buildings, their clients, architects and methods of financing. We didn't build three separate buildings, as others had proposed, but one continuous building which defined the street, formed a pedestrian plaza, and utilized a multi-storied building to announce the development from a great distance. The scale of the lower buildings was heightened at the street so that it read in conjunction with automobile traffic. High columns, plus toilet and stair cores were used at the corners. The scale at the plaza was much more intimate using stepped floors which revealed each floor level, making a bowl of space. As one approaches the stepped six-storey-high building it reduces itself to only one storey. Since the high-rise building is an integral part of the whole, it calls for a particular kind of high-rise building. The multi-storied building was designed as a cluster of pivoting shafts, each turning at the corners so that it leads the pedestrian into the plaza. It is not just another skyscraper. When finished properly it will be 'a place.'"

Within the pedestrian courtyard, ziggurat-shaped facades reduce the scale of the floors to each of the surrounding offices. Each floor is stepped back with a balcony on the roof of the floor below, creating a pleasant landscaped area where the public could escape the confines of the building, relax and enjoy the sunny courtyard. The other side of these perimeter offices is very different. While the inside of this court is single storey and low; the main street-facing exterior is high with 60 to 70 feet columns. The outer portion of the uppermost sixth floor is designed to overhang, thus creating a flamboyant change across the width of offices overlooking the streets. Under this necklace of perimeter offices is a quiet central plaza that expands into a labyrinth of footpaths and little gardens that relieve the monotony of the large courtyard.

TOP The Lindemann Center's sci-fi looking exterior, amorphous passageways and spiral staircases can have a disorientating and psychologically disturbing effect.

OPPOSITE "With a short rise and a two-foot tread, they cannot be climbed one at a time: one has to take a short, limping, extra little step to reach the next one."

With a romanticised view of mental illness, Rudolph made the building “insane” in the hope that it would sooth those who dwell in it by reflecting the insanity they feel within.

It was Rudolph’s belief that “Architecture is used space formed for psychological and symbolical reasons. Architectural space overrides all its integrating elements and concepts by consciously forming enclosed void to accommodate human beings in the totality of their psychic and physical life and in their various pursuits and intentions.” Guided by this philosophy, he started work on the first phase (1962–1971) of the project: the Erich Lindemann Mental Health Center.

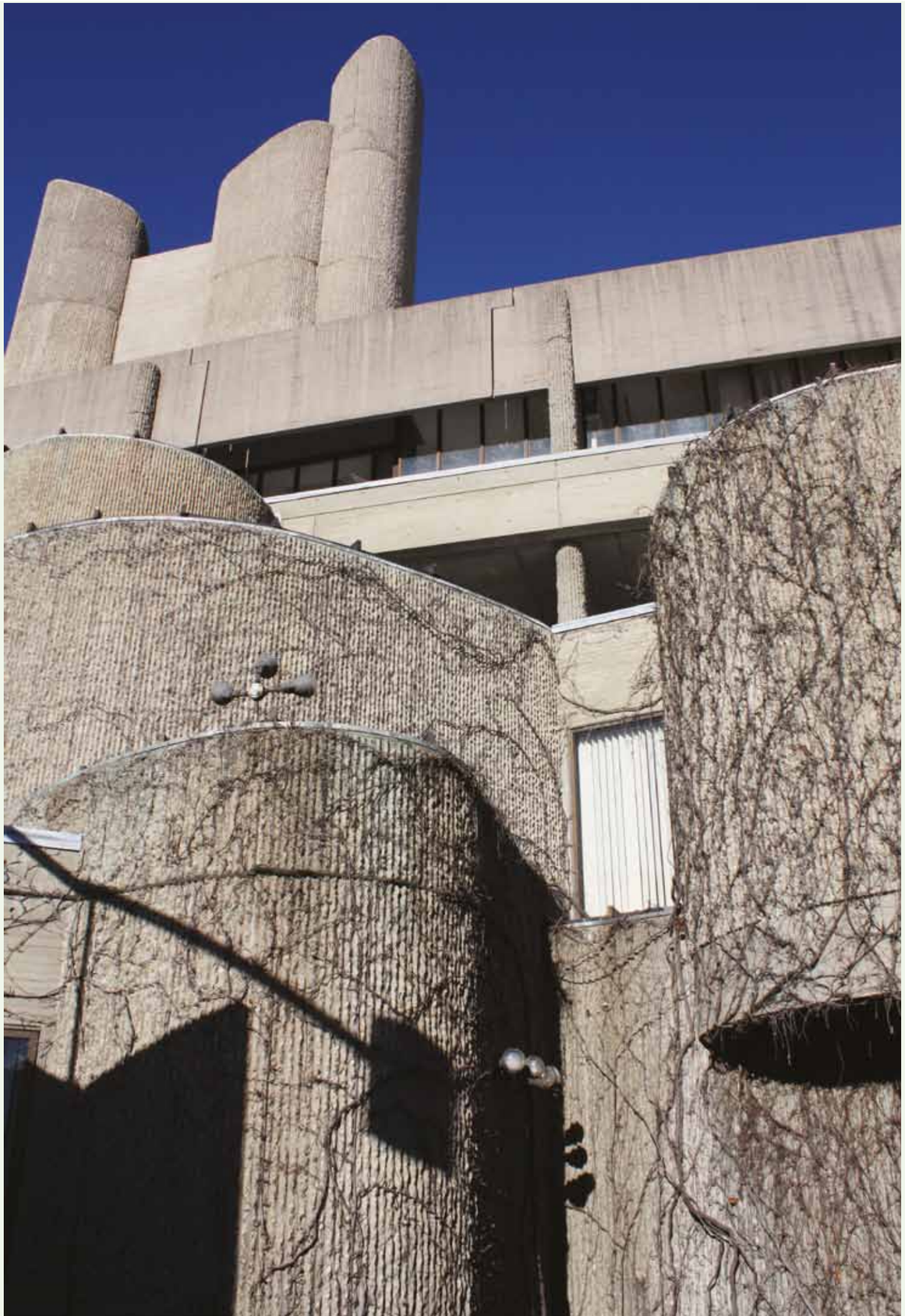
Landscape of madness

In designing this post-war urban renewal mental health facility, Rudolph experimented with the idea of the “psychology of space.” The Lindemann Center, a Brutalist mammoth of jagged stone appears cold, intimidating and alien and was the perfect location for the paranoia-inducing 2006 Martin Scorsese crime film *The Departed*. With its sci-fi looking exterior, cave-like corridors, amorphous passageways and spiral staircases, it can often be disorientating and psychologically disturbing. The building’s exterior and interior surfaces make extensive use of Rudolph’s signature ribbed, bush-hammered concrete (aka “corduroy concrete”), which he first employed in his earlier Yale Art and Architecture Building. In the BGSC, Rudolph mixes the rectilinearity of the Yale design with extravagant curved forms similar to his contemporary Endo Laboratories building on Long Island. Buried in the middle of this mental health department is a meditation chapel with only a single rooflight illuminating the space that has since been sealed off. The interior walls are constructed out of ribbed concrete, and these ubiquitous ribbed walls can also be found on the exterior walls, staircases, public areas, service towers and columns. The strength of the material with exposed concrete on the vertical arrises, creates an atmosphere of ageless permanence but sometimes provokes an adverse claustrophobic response in people.

When Rudolph designed the Lindemann Center, he had hoped to create a landscape that would reflect the interior mental states of inmates suffering from Alzheimer’s, dementia or schizophrenia. Armed with his theory of psychology, Rudolph tried to recreate the hallucinogenic or exaggerated mental and emotional states of the insane with never-ending inchoate corridors, a chapel with a dismal atmosphere and macabre twisting stairways, one of which, like an oubliette in a medieval keep, leads nowhere. The building’s dramatic structures and subliminal imagery (there is a thinly veiled frog’s head looking out from the building’s facade) make the Lindemann Center very expressive, but also foreboding and dangerous. With a romanticised view of mental illness, Rudolph made the building “insane” in the hope that it would sooth those who dwell in it by reflecting the insanity they feel within. Unfortunately, the outcome is not what the architect had hoped for.

Vincent Scully, Sterling Professor Emeritus of the History of Art at Yale University warned that the building “puts demands upon the individual user that not every psyche will be able to meet.” Many patients were negatively affected by the design of the building.

In his book, *Treating the Poor* (1992), Matthew Dumont, a Boston psychiatrist, records his fears about sending a schizophrenic patient to the Lindemann Center: “There is a certain perverse genius in the design of the build-



ANTI-CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
The building’s exterior and interior surfaces make extensive use of Rudolph’s signature ribbed, bush-hammered concrete.

Within the pedestrian courtyard, ziggurat-shaped facades reduce the scale of the floors to each of the surrounding offices.

A necklace of buildings surround the space where a 23-storey tower was never built.

The main street-facing exterior is high with 60 to 70 feet columns.

ing for people with poor ego boundaries." He argues that many elements of the design conspire to defeat mentally ill patients' efforts to orient themselves in space. One culprit is the bush-hammered concrete walls that are used on every surface, inside and out. Dumont writes that patients "generally like to tap a corridor wall as they walk down it as a way of assuring themselves that they are not falling through a dreamlike vortex. But if you try to touch the wall of a corridor at Lindemann as you walk, your knuckles are likely to be bloodied." The exterior stairs also confuse patients by "majestically rising not to, but through the building," inducing what one Lindemann staff member referred to as a "kinaesthetic disorder." Dumont describes this phenomenon: "A Cinderella staircase emerges gradually from engraved curvilinear lines in the sidewalk. One stumbles at first, thinking that the lines represent steps, and then stumbles again when they imperceptibly do begin to become steps. With a short rise and a two-foot tread, they cannot be climbed one at a time: one has to take a short, limping, extra little step to reach the next one. The building thereby programs disabled behavior."

Over the years, there have been stories of patients getting lost in the building, and accounts of assault of other patients and staff. What is even more sinister is how suicide attempts and assaults repeatedly occur at particular areas in the building. For instance, there is a catwalk over the plaza-level lobby that had to be glazed because too many suicide attempts took place there. The chapel was sealed shut shortly after the building was opened in 1972, because a patient died there after setting himself on fire on the concrete slab altar. As one former Lindemann Center psychiatrist noted darkly, the already befuddled patient was just following cues in his environment. "It looks like a place that should be used for human sacrifice," the psychiatrist noted.

Though now still in operation, the Lindemann Center is in poor condition. With bedraggled inmates dragging their feet along dismal grey halls, this building is a notorious example of architecture's power to agitate, confuse and fatally overwhelm. The rest of the building, also in a state of weary neglect, stands as a reminder of the unhappy times caused by an ineffectual attempt at urban renewal. The edges of the sweeping, curved exterior stairways are crumbling, with its rebars exposed. The exterior plaza on the north side, shown in Rudolph's original drawings as a vibrant place full of benches, trees, and people, is now a dank parking lot enclosed by a chain link fence. The weathered building is surrounded on one side by curved shaped concrete benches along its facade, which are often used by the local homeless population to take refuge from the weather or sleep. Perhaps the BGSC, though magnificent, daring and functional in many ways, also serves as a warning against trying to accommodate too much, too quickly.

TOP Light streams through from above into the car park level.

BOTTOM The strength of the material with exposed concrete creates an atmosphere of ageless permanence.

OPPOSITE The BGSC was built to be integrated into the surrounding fabric with vehicular and pedestrian circulation taken into consideration.