After 70 years of use and subway vibrations, the city hall in New York City sorely needed renovating so contractors combined STO products and expertise to give it a new, bright look.

**NEW LOOK FOR CITY HALL**

ew York City Hall is an anoma-  
yl. Although New York has  
grown to proportions that its  
founders hardly could have dreamed of, City Hall has survived as the seat of local politics for over 175 years. As New York Times critic Paul Gold-  
berger notes in his book, *The City Observed*, “It makes no sense at all  
that the largest city in the nation is still  
rung from the same small building that  
housed its headquarters in 1811, and  
that fact is absolutely wonderful.”

Yet if the modestly-scaled, French Renaissance-and-Georgian-styled  
building seems merely a fragile rem-  
nant of a gentler era, a closer look at  
its history reveals that it is more like  
a durable monument to the quality  
that has always helped define New  
York: tenacity of spirit in the face of  
frequent adversity.

The current City Hall is actually the  
third in New York’s history. The first  
was a modest Dutch-styled building  
located on Pearl Street, near the  
island’s southernmost tip. It was  
originally a tavern that served the  
traders who used New Amsterdam as  
a port town.

When Peter Stuyvesant became the  
City’s first governor in 1653, he had  
the tavern converted into a city hall.  
The second was built around 1700, on  
Wall Street near Broad. The city had  
expanded considerably by then, and  
the new structure, designed by James  
Evetts, reached two full stories in  
height, and was topped with a bell and  
watchtower.

The building was the site of several  
key events in the country’s War of In-  
dependence, including the Stamp Act  
Congress of 1765, the colonies’ first act  
of defiance toward Parliament. When  
the English evacuated the city in 1783,  
City Hall became the temporary home  
of Congress. It remained in use until  
1812, when it was demolished to make  
way for a Customs House.

In the meantime, the Common Council (a forerunner to the City Council) had sponsored a competition for the design and construction of a new City Hall. In 1802, it awarded the grand prize of $350 to Joseph Mangin and John McComb, Jr. for their jointly-submitted design. When estimated construction costs proved higher than anticipated, the Council ordered the plans redrawn to accommodate the city’s budget.

McComb ultimately convinced the  
Council to retain certain elements,  
such as marble for the exterior front  
and sides; the rear and basement of the  
building, however, were faced in  
brownstone, the prevailing belief be-  
ing that the city would not expand  
northward. Much attention was lav-  
ished upon the building’s interior, par-  
icularly its magnificent rotunda and  
double-curved stairway. The new City  
Hall was dedicated on July 4, 1811, its  
final construction costs estimated at a  
half-million dollars.
Fire Tested . . .

City Hall’s ability to persevere was first tested by a major fire in 1858, which destroyed the building’s tower and attic floors. The structure was promptly rebuilt, and continued to serve the city which burgeoned on all sides of it. However, as the needs of city government changed, the building’s rooms were altered to suit those ends. In 1898, the newly-formed Art Commission undertook to restore the interiors of City Hall, integrating McComb’s original plan with elements meant to recapture the spirit of the Federal style. The project carried on for seventeen years, and helped establish the interior arrangement that is still used today. It was also the last major restoration of the building’s interior until this past decade.

Any building that is in constant use for seventy years is bound to suffer its share of abuse. City Hall’s problems
were exacerbated by the presence of subway lines running underneath the building. Vibrations from passing trains began causing chandeliers to shake and walls to crack.

The problem was brought to the attention of Robert Kelly, Assistant Director for the city’s Bureau of Facilities Management, in 1980. He undertook a series of investigations to determine the best method for restoring the building’s interior and preventing any further damage from vibrations.

STO had been recommended to him as a maker of interior coating systems and restoration products which seemed to resist cracking. Kelly met with Chic DiGregorio from STO of New York, who demonstrated the company’s line of products.

“I was impressed,” recalls Kelly.

But he mentioned that other products had seemed to do the job, only to fail over time. At that point, DiGregorio offered to restore a sample area—1,000 square feet of hallway walls and ceilings—at no charge, simply as a test of his product. Kelly accepted, and in April 1981, work began by tapping the walls to locate loose material, which was then cut away, sometimes as much as two inches deep, down to the original substrate.

These wall sections were rebuilt and brought up the level of the surrounding plaster wall utilizing layers of STO Armor Mat, a heavy-duty fiberglass reinforcing mesh and STO BTS-A, an adhesive-leveler. Once repaired, leveled and sealed, the entire wall surface was reinforced with STO RFP Ground Coat, STO Fiberglass Reinforcing Mesh and, finally, STO Thin Coat Plaster. In late 1983, when the work had been held up for over two years, STO was listed in the proprietary spec as the company which would provide all interior wall coating systems.

The restoration of City Hall is an ongoing series of projects. Thus far, STO Products and Systems have been used for every project, including the main entrance, Mayor’s Office, the Blue Room, the Governor’s Room, and parts of the Rotunda. J.P. Loconsolo, president, of Belt Painting Corporation, the contractor for the work at City Hall, mentioned that STO Thin Coat Plaster has been effective in providing crack-free coverage, while closely matching original surfaces. Plasterers who worked on the project were required to attend a two-day training seminar in the use of STO products, insuring that application would be carried out properly.

Because of City Hall’s unique character—one of solid purposefulness offset by delicate beauty—everyone involved in the restoration seemed to take a special pride in its being done right.

Said Loconsolo, “It’s a showplace for the City and the nation. Working on a building like City Hall is an honor.”

As an example of architecture that stands up to the demands of a teeming city with dignity and determination, New York City Hall stands alone.