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Cothrum: My father was the only vote against City Hall. Looks like he had it right

After his death, I've been reassured by many people who talked about how much he loved Dallas.

The Dallas Morning News

By [Dallas Cothrum](#), Contributing Columnist

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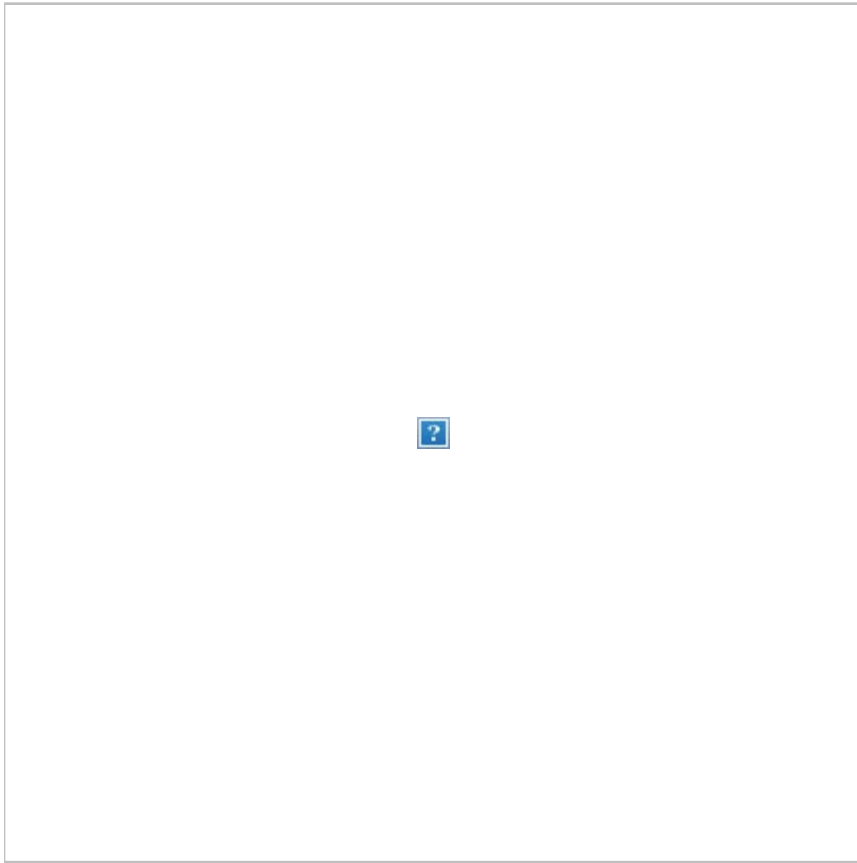
An exterior view of Dallas City Hall at sunset in downtown Dallas, Nov. 4, 2025. Dallas Cothrum writes about his father's dislike of the building in which he spent much of his professional career. TOM FOX / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A surprising amount of joy has come my way following my father Willie Cothrum's recent death. Many people have noted the significant impact he had on the city. Former Mayor Mike Rawlings summed it up succinctly, "He did good for Dallas."

His sometimes critic and every time friend, Jim Schutze, opined about Dad and his firm, "In a messed up city where it seems like you can't get anything done, they got — and get — things done. Played clean. Got it done."

In a time of sorrow, it's been nice to have so many people write, call and tell me directly that during various parts of the 1960s to 1980s when he served, he was a good City Council member.

It reminded me of his now largely forgotten opposition to building a new City Hall. He was the only member of the council to vote against the building we have now. It's a bit of an irony: He spent the remainder of his professional career as a lobbyist in a building he didn't vote for and didn't like.



Former Dallas City Council member Willie Cothrum, who served across two stints from 1965 to 1980, is pictured here during his tenure. Cothrum died on Nov. 5, 2025. He was 87. DALLAS MUNICIPAL ARCHIVES / DALLAS MUNICIPAL ARCHIVES

He was the first deputy mayor pro tem in that building. Several times he remarked his punishment for not voting for the building was a small windowless office within the concrete beast. Until recently, all his successors were assigned the same office.

I was blessed to work with my father for many years. Our firm, Masterplan Consultants, had offices at the 500 S. Ervay building to the east of City Hall from the 1980s to the early 2000s, and later at Founders Square to the west. We'd walk to the People's Palace daily, sometimes multiple times. He'd regularly bemoan what a terrible building it was. I suspect he appreciated the building being the set for the bad guy's headquarters in *Robocop*.

So for this column, I'll borrow an opinion he shared with me many, many times. I've spent a lot of time in the building. It's not inviting or easy to use. It's not easy to improve that. It was built as a monument, not as a functional building.

I'm not an architectural critic, but I am a professional trained historian. There's nothing

particularly historic about the building. It's not even old. The previous municipal building, by way of contrast, is historic, given its age and the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby in its parking structure.

I.M. Pei very well may have created an architectural masterpiece, Willie would joke, but it's a terrible building for people to use. He'd say it's all form and no function. Indeed, the building remains difficult to move around in. It's not loved by the employees who have to serve their time there.

Dad did like the Morton Meyerson Symphony Center, Fountain Place and One Dallas Center — all Pei buildings. He'd jest that City Hall would be the lowest seed in a tournament and not even make the finals of a Pei beauty contest for Dallas projects. He thought Pei was a delightful person but delivered a bad public building. It's one of the only times I can recall him not being in sync with former City Manager George Schrader.



Construction site of I. M. Pei's City Hall. Shot June 1, 1974. LEE LANGUM - STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER / DMN FILE PHOTO

My father was trained as a civil engineer and, like most engineers, sought practical solutions. He was also frugal — sometimes downright cheap — and he always treated the public coffers like his wallet.

His chief complaint was that the building could not house all the city departments when it opened. This remains a problem. People doing business with the city are often surprised that there is a cruel scavenger hunt required to find the office they're looking for — always without instructions.

Willie also believed that the slanted glass windows would be a problem. He was right. Water penetration everywhere in the building remains an issue that is literally sinking the structure. He was also extremely dubious of the energy efficiency of the building, especially the heating and cooling of the large atriums.

Other complaints abounded. He hated the plaza, believing it too big. He'd say it's only ever used when people want to show up and complain — though he'd use a stronger word than complain.

He pointed out that the building lacked the parking needed for its employees. He thought they should not charge employees for parking. At one time, some employees

walked from south of Interstate 30. The parking situation created two classes of people: the insiders and the outsiders. I always suspected he was making a point about how City Hall works.

The entire project with City Hall, the central library and the 500 S. Ervay Building (which housed Code Enforcement, Building Inspection and other departments) has never worked. It's never drawn people to the area. City facilities do not work as part of mixed-use projects. People have to go there; they don't want to go there.

I've heard defenders of the building propose a referendum. That's not how our government works. We elect leaders to make decisions. If you are going to have a referendum on the building then also have one on keeping the Mavericks in Dallas. I've got a lot of friends who have Mavericks jerseys and T-shirts, but I don't know any with I.M. Pei hoodies.

When repairs to City Hall were not included in the most recent bond package, it meant city leaders did not deem it a priority. They did not have a lot of enthusiasm for putting more money in the building then. Now the costs have gone up as have the stakes of potentially losing the Dallas Mavericks.

President Ronald Reagan famously declared, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" I believe the refrain from City Council will be, "Mr. Johnson, tear down this City Hall!"

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