Long way to the top

Initially plagued by controversy, the John Hancock Tower has become a prized part of the city's skyline.

By Mark Feeney, Globe Staff, 4/29/2003

"When you look out the windows you can see forever," says Jack Connors, chairman of Hill Holliday advertising agency, whose office is on the 39th floor of the John Hancock Tower. "If you want to have high expectations and grand plans, it's a great place to be. You can't think small in the Hancock Tower." The tallest building on the Boston skyline at 60 stories, the Hancock is also the most spectacular and distinctive. Its mirrored, rhomboid shape has been variously described as a sail, a sculpture, an immense mirror, and a pure volume. "It's been compared to the church steeple on a metropolitan common -- and that's what it is: Boston's steeple," says architectural historian Douglass Shand-Tucci.

Now almost universally praised, it was once almost universally denounced. Unnecessary, its critics called it, overbearing, a desecration, even immoral. And that was before the Hancock was even built. Then its windows began falling out, its cost soared from $75 million to $175 million, and its opening was delayed for five years, from 1971 to '76. "No building in our time has been more cursed," according to The New York Times.

"To become a laughingstock on top of becoming a villain, ridiculed as well as despised, is an exceptional experience," says the Hancock's architect, Henry N. Cobb, of the New York-based firm Pei Cobb Freed & Partners.

When Beacon Capital Partners LLC paid $910 million to John Hancock Financial Services Inc. last month for the tower and two nearby buildings, it was buying far more than a prominent piece of Boston real estate. It was buying a remarkable piece of history. "When you look at the old John Hancock [building] or Trinity Church reflected in the glass of the tower," says Alan Leventhal, Beacon's chairman and chief executive, "you see a juxtaposition of old and new that captures what Boston is all about. It's the heritage of Boston and the future of Boston."

Upstaging the Prudential The Hancock sits atop 3,000 steel pilings driven 140 feet down to bedrock on the south side of Copley Square. Yet its history begins about three blocks away from that mighty foundation, up Boylston Street, at the Prudential Center.

"There are two amazing bookends in the Back Bay," says Bernard Margolis, president of the Boston Public Library. "One is the John Hancock, the Prudential is the other, with the library filled with books in between."

For a long time, there was only the library. Then the Prudential Insurance Co. saw fit to build its Northeastern regional headquarters in Boston. The city had been economically stagnant for decades, and no event better symbolized the New Boston than the dedication of the Pru in 1965. At 52 stories, it was the tallest building in the world outside Manhattan. Indeed, it was twice as tall as the John Hancock Building, the tower's chunky, lovable predecessor, which had previously been the city's tallest office building at 26 stories. And there was the problem.

The regional headquarters of the Newark-based Prudential now lording it over the corporate headquarters of its rival, the Boston-based John Hancock? Barely two years after the Pru opened, Hancock announced plans to erect its own tower. "There was no debate at all," retired Museum of Science head and former Hancock board member Bradford Washburn says with a chuckle, recalling the decision to put up a new headquarters. "We just built it."

So: no Pru, no Hancock.
In everything except location and height, they are such an ill-matched pair: the Cain and Abel, the Whitey and Billy, the Goofus and Gallant of Boston's psychic skyline. The older sibling is shorter, duller, and nowhere near as presentable. "Awful urbanism," Shand-Tucci says, "a textbook example of a very bad period in architecture."

Its mediocrity as design mocks the glorious minimalism of its neighbor. How forgettable is the Pru? It needs to proclaim its name in 14 1/2-foot letters on the 52d floor. The idea of signage on the Hancock is as unthinkable as its toppling over in a gale. (Actually, that may not be the best analogy -- we'll get to that later.)

Yet the most suitable member of the royal family doesn't necessarily become monarch: It's the one who came first. The Hancock will always be the younger sibling. Its serenity, its cool detachment (notice how it literally stands back from the street), its Late Modern aloofness all bespeak a sense of having arrived afterward, of not leading the parade.

The Hancock has excellent reasons for seeming somewhat distant and cold. As the first skyscraper built in the city in nearly two decades, the Pru could afford to make a big splash, however clumsy. The Hancock, arriving at the end of a building boom and situated by two of the city's most venerated pieces of architecture, Trinity Church and the Boston Public Library's McKim Building, did everything possible to deflect attention from itself. "It's a silent building," says Cobb. "The reason it's silent is it's designed to respond to Copley Square. If it weren't silent it would really be offensive in its presence there."

The Pru is anything but silent. It has shops, a Christmas tree, the Top of the Hub restaurant, the Skywalk. The Hancock did have its observatory, but that closed after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The Pru even has a cute diminutive for a nickname. No one has ever thought to refer to the "Han." Admittedly biased, Jack Connors says, "I never understood why they didn't call it the Jack Hancock Tower."

Perhaps the most appropriate name would have simply been the Taller Tower. The new Hancock building was to be 40 feet higher than the Pru. How important a consideration was this? Washburn, whose history of high-altitude mountaineering was well known around the Hancock board room, offers this story. "As the building was nearing completion, there was a great deal of chitchat whether [the Hancock] was going to be higher than the Prudential building. They asked me to go up to the top of the tower on an aluminum ladder lashed vertically up the side of the building to see how high it was." He did, and the calculations were correct.

Over at the Pru, the height was never in doubt. The company released a statement: "We at Prudential welcome the announcement by John Hancock as an expression of mutual confidence in a great future for Boston." The Prudential was putting a good face on a grim situation. Soon enough, though, the grimness would be all Hancock's.

Problems mountWhen Hancock announced the project, criticism was swift, vocal, and widespread. The Boston Society of Architects called it "an egotistical monument." The design board of the Boston Redevelopment Authority opposed it. Edward Logue, who had recently resigned as head of the BRA, said the Hancock proposal was "an outrage."

The Hancock angered its critics on two counts.

First, there was the issue of putting a 790-foot-tall building so close to Trinity Church and the library. "It wasn't a question of whether the design was good," as Cobb recalls, "but was it the wrong thing to do to begin with? The underlying premise of the project was considered unacceptable by a great many people."

Second, the Hancock went against the tenor of the times. The Pru, as well as the enthusiasm it generated, was very much a product of a '50s boomer mentality. The Hancock had to contend with a vastly different cultural landscape. After construction began, the radical activist Abbie Hoffman stood on the steps of the library and shook his fist at the tower. "There is the enemy," he declared.

"It was an era when big was bad, small was beautiful," Cobb says. "Although I've been involved in other projects that were quite controversial, there was nothing with the ferocity of this." The Hancock proposal suffered from what he calls "guilt by association. It was seen as the architectural emblem of everything that people were trying to get away from" in the '60s. Cobb believes that if the building had been proposed as little as two years later, it would not have been approved.

How did Hancock overcome such strong opposition? It threatened to move its operations to Chicago (where it conveniently happened to be building a 100-story skyscraper). The project got the city's approval, although it required three zoning variances to pull it off.

Groundbreaking was in August 1968, and almost immediately there was a problem. Workers dug up 500 million pounds of earth, but the excavation was botched. Settling affected Trinity, the Copley Plaza Hotel, nearby streets and sidewalks and utility lines. Eventually, Trinity sued and won $11.6 million in damages from Hancock. Worse, rumors began to circulate that the tower was sinking and would have to be torn down.
It wasn't the tower that came down, though. It was the windows. They started popping out during high winds in 1972. And these were serious windows: 4 1/2 feet by 11 1/2 feet in size, weighing 500 pounds each. The rain of glass kept up for four years. MIT built a scale model of Back Bay in its Wright Brothers Wind Tunnel to try to determine the cause of the problem (it was a flaw in the windows' design). Plywood covered 33 floors of the exterior, and all 10,334 panes of glass were replaced at a cost of $7 million to $8 million, borne by the windows' manufacturer. (There's no official figure available: As part of the legal settlement, all parties remain enjoined from discussing details of what happened.)

Wooden canopies went up over adjacent sidewalks. Police closed off surrounding streets whenever winds were predicted of over 45 miles per hour. The city decreed two spotters with binoculars be stationed in Copley Square to keep an eye on the windows. Amazingly, no one was hurt. Connors, though, recalls how a pane of glass "went right through the back window of my parked car."

Eventually, the plywood came down, most of it bought by the BRA to board up condemned buildings. There were two other problems, however, although they garnered only a fraction of the attention the windows did.

Every tall building sways slightly in high winds. It turned out the Hancock did so to a literally unsettling degree. The solution was to place a 600-ton device called a tuned mass damper on the 58th floor to correct the motion.

It's been said no building in history has been subjected to more analysis than the Hancock. A good thing, too, because an unexpected byproduct of all the research was the discovery that under "extreme and rare wind conditions which could possibly occur over the next 100 years," as the technical report put it, the building could topple on its side -- its narrow side, in fact. Several million dollars later, the tower's interior was braced from top to bottom with steel strutting.

On Sept. 29, 1976, the tower was dedicated. Asked if Hancock had been embarrassed by all the construction problems, a company spokesman replied, "I would have to say yes."

Mockery to masterpieceIt's hard to imagine so tranquil and lapidary-looking a structure having such a messy history. But that was then, this is now, and it's tranquility that prevails. What was once considered a joke was soon enough being regarded as a masterpiece.

The American Institute of Architects bestowed a National Honor Award on the Hancock in 1977. Six years later, the Boston Society of Architects -- the same BSA that had excoriated the idea of building the Hancock back in 1967 -- awarded the tower its Harlston Parker Medal for the best new work of architecture in Boston. "The Committee has no doubts that the tower is the most beautiful contemporary tower in Boston," the citation read, "and probably in the entire United States." A 1994 Globe poll of architects and historians rated it Boston's third-best work of architecture, after Trinity Church and the Boston Public Library's McKim Building.

Cobb, whose other Boston projects include the master plan for Government Center, Harbor Towers, and the federal courthouse on Fan Pier, doubts admiration for the Hancock is universal. "The project is still not well regarded by some," he says. "But over the years, clearly, from where it began, its reputation could only go up."

It's been more than 35 years since Cobb completed the Hancock design. Can he say what most pleases him, and displeases him, about the building?

"'Pleased' or 'displeased' is not the right word. The best way I can answer that is by saying, retrospectively, there is nothing about the tower's presence in the city I would change."

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