

Boston's Theatre District

Boston's Theatre District has a long a varied history. During the colonial period, this area surrounding the southeast corner of the Common was a marshy, sparsely settled region outside the original town center. Washington Street, a commercial thoroughfare, was the only land route from the Shawmut Peninsula to Roxbury and as such attracted several taverns. Commercial activity at this strategic location increased with the construction of Bulfinch's Boylston Market in 1810 at the corner of Boylston and Washington Streets; here farmers would bring their produce from outlying areas. By the 1830's and 1840's railroad terminals were located in nearby Park Square and the recently filled South Cove. The presence of travelers seeking entertainment in an area well-located between the City's business and residential districts proved an attractive combination. Soon theatres appeared here, the earliest one being the Lion (1835) which featured equestrian and dramatic arts and later became a concert hall. By the early 20th century, the area became a full-fledged theatre district as legitimate theatres and vaudeville, burlesque, and movie houses were constructed along Washington, Tremont, and Boylston Streets. The demolition of Scollay Square to build Government Center brought a new twist to the district as it became overrun with X-rated adult entertainment outlets bringing with them the appellation of the Combat Zone.

Recently the Theatre District has received new attention in the preservation community. Six of its theatres, the Colonial (1899-1900), the Saxon (1903), the Wilbur (1914), the Metropolitan (Wang Center - 1925), the Savoy (1928), and the Paramount (1932) were proposed as Landmarks before a hearing of the Boston Landmarks Commission held in October, 1983. The Wilbur, Colonial, and Metropolitan were the work of Charles Blackall, while John Galen Howard, Thomas Lamb, and Arthur Bowditch designed the Saxon, Savoy, and Paramount Theatres respectively. The Landmarks Commission staff is recommending that only the interiors of the Colonial and Metropolitan be designated as Landmarks, while the other nominations include both exteriors and interiors.

Recent investments have injected new vigor into the Theatre District. The non-profit Metropolitan Center, incorporated in 1976,

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Preserving The Other Boston

by Stephen Mrozowski

Boston abounds in mnemonic devices which speak to the existence of another city lying dormant beneath its buildings and streets. Plaques such as the one at Center Plaza commemorating Scollay Square play an important role in keeping the City's past alive. Unfortunately one cannot recall what one has never seen. For the City's children or for those who visit in search of Puritans and Patriots a plaque does little. The 19th century architecture which is so prominent in Boston reflects a period of exuberance and pride when the City's architects were, in the words of one of my colleagues at the Landmarks Commission, "building for the rest of history." It is one of the sad ironies of Boston's past that in their quest for immortality, the City's builders would destroy much of what remained of their own heritage along with millenia of Native American culture. The Boston of Bulfinch is not the only Boston.

The archaeology of Boston remains like its history: unappreciated. Perhaps because that history seems to surround us, we tend to underrate its significance. In the past archaeologists have contributed to the myth that the archaeology of Boston was trivial and lacking in importance. Much of their interest revolved around "Indian" archaeology with a concomitant lack of concern for the European colonial experience. Like the 19th century architects of Boston, many local archaeologists chose to focus their efforts on the more ancient civilizations of the Middle East and Central America.

The myth of archaeological triviality has fortunately been eroded over the past forty years and we now recognize the importance of the northeast in North American prehistory. With the growth of historical archaeology, the development of American society is receiving the attention it warrants. Today's Boston should never lose sight of its past, for it is that past which forms the economic foundation of the City. The pride exhibited by the various neighborhoods in the City is a shared historical identity reflecting the diverse ethnic groups which have contributed to Boston's development. The flurry of building currently upon us should not squander the City's archaeological resources. That heritage tangibly reflected in the material remains of the past deserves to be displayed throughout the City so that our children will have more than a bronze plaque to inform them about their history.

Stephen Mrozowski is Boston's City Archaeologist.

review under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, and State Register review, and also makes clear that a state body's responsibility to consult the State Register is independent of its responsibility to assess potential impacts of a project under the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA).

For those who need to consult them, copies of the State Register Act and regulations may be obtained at any law library or, for a nominal charge, from the Massachusetts Secretary of State.

Matthew J. Kiefer practices real estate law with the Boston firm of Fine & Ambroge.

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has spent over \$7.5 million to restore the interior of the Metropolitan, expand its stage, construct an orchestra pit and dressing rooms, and undertake electrical and plumbing work. The Metropolitan Center, Inc., which leases the theatre from the New England Medical Center, opened the newly renovated building in late 1980. Structural problems in the roof forced the theatre to close for six months during the 1982-83 season but both physical and financial problems have been greatly alleviated by the generous contributions of the Wang family for which the theatre has been renamed. The Wangs have donated \$1 million outright for renovations and established a \$3 million challenge grant which must be matched in two years. Also four local lenders, the Shawmut, Bank of Boston, Bank of New England, and the State Street Bank have reduced the Metropolitan Center's debt and extended the term of the remaining balance over a 25 year period.



Washington Street before the Savoy was converted to the Opera House in 1978. Photo courtesy of the Boston Landmarks Commission.

Another theatre brought back to life is the Savoy. The Opera Company of Boston, which purchased the building in 1978, has expanded the orchestra pit and restored a substantial portion of the interior. The company's present goal is to expand the stage to 75 feet, which would necessitate closing Mason Street. Negotiations with abutters concerning the proposed closure are continuing. As with the Metropolitan, the Savoy is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Emerson College is the latest theatre owner in the district. The college purchased the Saxon in May for use in student performances. Local productions that do not compete with neighboring halls will also be staged here. Emerson plans to spend \$1.6 million to restore the structure to its former glory. Scheduled for completion by mid-1985, the theatre will reopen under its original name, the Majestic.

Planning strategies for the Theatre District have concentrated on encouraging new investment and reviving entertainment and retail shopping. Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) planners and consultants have emphasized building reuse, directing new construction at vacant or "underutilized" parcels. Nearby developments affecting the district include the 400 room Four Seasons Hotel, part of the BRA's Park Plaza Project, and Lafayette Place, now under construction on Washington Street, which combines a hotel, 200,000 square feet of retail space, and an underground city-owned garage.

In the heart of the district, Theater Plaza Associates is proposing a 10-story building at the corner of Tremont and Stuart Streets adjacent to the Wilbur Theatre and diagonally across from the new State Transportation Building. The structure, to be called "One Theater Plaza", will house 33,700 square feet of office space and a two story restaurant at ground level. Architects from the firm of Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson & Abbott were restricted in their designs by the narrowness of the site and a setback requirement to allow visibility of the Wilbur Theatre. Current plans call for a 30 by 40 foot open space in front of the building marked at night by a "light sculpture". As described in The Boston Globe, this sculpture would be a 50 foot high column that could have a major searchlight fixture on top capable of shooting a beam skyward. The architects are proposing to decorate the building itself with bands of rose colored granite and glass. Both the architects and

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Victorian Block Survives Amid Towers

by H. Parker James

As the mammoth developments of the South Station area encroach on the Commercial Palace District, there is one block which maintains the link between the district's human scale and the towers of Dewey Square. The block, bounded by Summer, Essex, Lincoln, and South Streets, is particularly vulnerable. Parts of it have already been flattened by demolition, but preservationists can be encouraged by the fact that several buildings of merit remain.

Of particular interest is 115 Summer Street, at the corner of Lincoln. This building has a unique style in the downtown area. The Boston Landmarks Commission's Central Business District inventory describes it as being Gothic/Chateausque in character, but there is a singular almost Furnessian feeling to the fenestration on the top story which defies such pigeonholing. 115 Summer Street prominently occupies its corner site, an important fact since it stands opposite the newly renovated Church Green and Bedford Buildings.

Next door at 119-121 Summer Street is another building which adds flavor to the context of the street. It is interesting both because of its appearance, and because of the extent to which fireproof materials were employed in its construction. The bottom two stories are castiron storefronts yielding (for the time of its construction) wide areas of glass. The upper two stories are of white marble, culminating in a mansard roof. Cast iron double hung sash windows as well as a metal cornice were installed as fireproof measures in the upper stories. The building is "L" shaped and has a fine cast iron functionalist facade which fronts onto Lincoln Street.

Perhaps the most significant structure on the block is the Josiah P. Cooke building located at the intersection of Summer and South Streets. It is one of the few remaining examples of the Panel Brick Style in downtown Boston. Its facade was designed with generous granite detailing and quoining as well as a handsome rounded corner element at Summer and South bearing the initials "J.P.C." after the man who financed the building. The J.P.C. building is of particular historical interest since it was under construction at the time of the Great Fire of 1872. As such, it represents a kind of visual link between the appearance of pre-

fire and post-fire downtown Boston. The original plans were drafted by the noteworthy firm of Ware and Van Brunt, architects of Harvard's Memorial Hall. The half-finished building was leveled by the fire, but if the original plans were employed in the rebuilding, the J.P.C. building is of major importance.

Of the other buildings which remain intact only two areas of immediate post fire vintage. One at 131-135 Summer Street has a handsome white marble facade bearing elements of the Neo-Grec commercial style with Italianate detailing. This is particularly obvious in the segmentally arched windows on the upper story windows. The other, located at 32 Lincoln Street is pure Neo-Grec, with a beige sandstone facade incised with geometric detailing.

Grafted to the far corner of 32 Lincoln Street is a particularly poignant reminder of what has been lost. It is a fragment of the building which occupied the corner of Lincoln and Essex Streets. Its pink and white banded marble with gothicized detailing is reminiscent of the Bedford building, its near neighbor.

The fate of this historic block is in question. The Zoning Commission reports that developers have made inquiries about the block, but that none have filed anything formally as of yet. Several of these buildings have been nominated to the National Register as part of the Commercial Palace District, but more effort must be made if they are to be saved the fate of their sister structure at Lincoln and Essex.

H. Parker James is a contributor to the *AllianceLetter*.

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developers hope the building will become a major identifier of the Theatre District.

It is clear from current and proposed projects that while much has happened to revitalize the Theatre District, more is yet to come.

Tina Dong contributed material to the above article.