



BOSTON
PRESERVATION
ALLIANCE

Ladder Blocks

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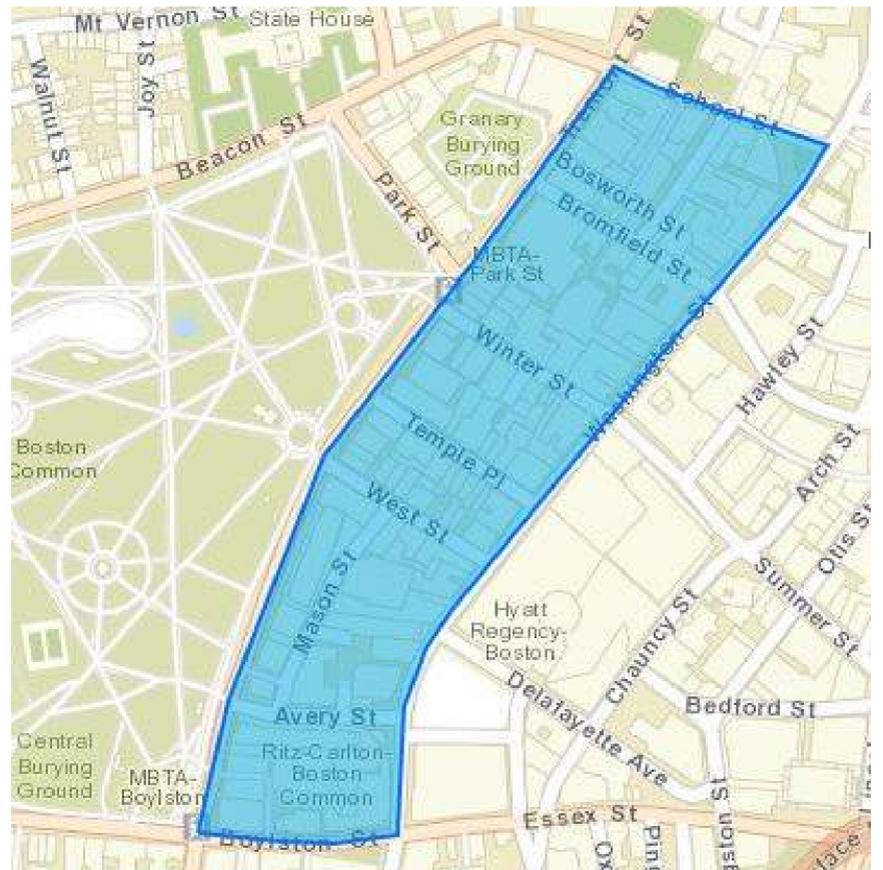
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BOSTON
PRESERVATION
ALLIANCE

OVERVIEW

- Series of city blocks within Boston's iconic Downtown
- Encompassing historic Washington Street Theatre District
- Eastern edge of the Boston Common, north of Chinatown, and west of the Financial District
- From School to Boylston Streets, between Tremont and Washington Streets



Located in the heart of Boston, the Ladder Blocks is a rising district full of high-end restaurants, elegant shopping centers, expensive high-rises, and successful businesses. The streets are frequently congested with heavy pedestrian traffic; allowing visitors to experience the historic streets and unique character of the nineteenth century architecture and marvel at the human-scale massing of the buildings. Currently, the neighborhood is considered to have some of the highest pedestrian counts on the East Coast, coming second to New York City.

While famous for the grandeur of the commercial hub, the Ladder Blocks are also known for the rich history they emulate through its buildings and streets. Bromfield Street is often thought to be the epitome of Old Boston, Winter Street reminisces back to the pre-automobile days as an exclusive pedestrian promenade, and Washington Street was originally the main thoroughfare connecting the Shawmut Peninsula to the mainland. Each street has an ensemble of architecturally significant buildings; displaying nineteenth-century commercial row houses, tightly compacted together to create a wall of unique and fun shopping centers.

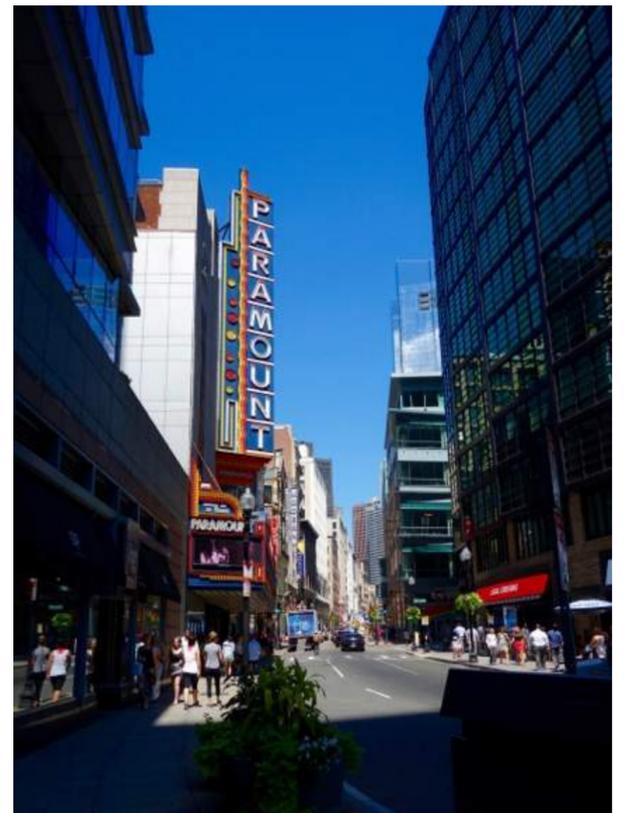


Bromfield Street

- Stores tucked in side-by-side creating an intimate experience for pedestrians
- Retains the character of the days before superstores, when shopping was personal and unique
- Surviving examples of granite row houses specific to Commercial Boston

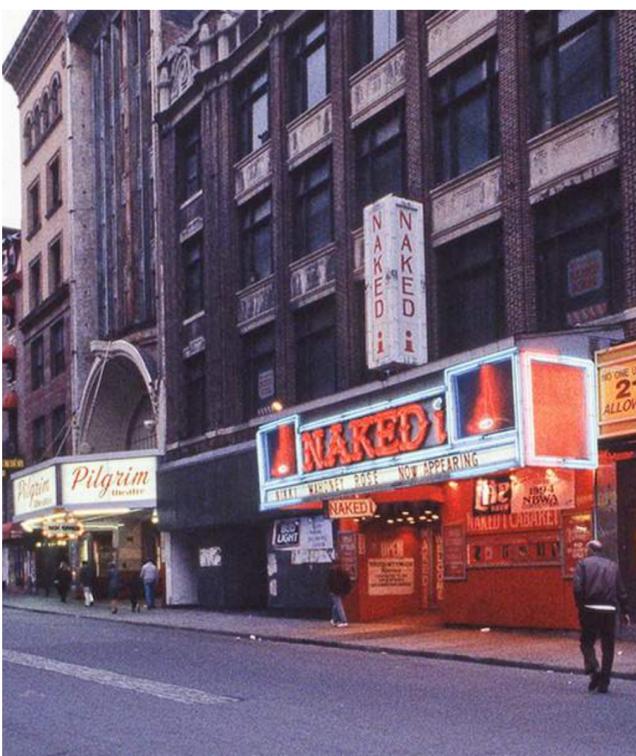
Washington Street Theatre District

- Popular destination among tourists and locals
- Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, it contains seven buildings dating back from 1870s to the early 1930s
- Showcases its role in vaudeville, early movies, and diverse architectural style
- Theatre District was formerly the epicenter of adult entertainment and illicit activities in Boston, also known as the Combat Zone



The Combat Zone

- Adult oriented bars and theaters began taking over Washington Street in the 1960s
- The city confined the activities into an area dubbed the "Adult Entertainment District"
- The once affluent neighborhood became undesirable; plagued of crimes, drugs, and prostitution
- After many strides made by the city, the Boston Preservation Alliance, and other organizations, the Combat Zone was revitalized into the dynamic neighborhood that is present today





While the Ladder Blocks have evolved, the original character and historic presence is retained in the copious amount of buildings that survived. The neighborhood is a virtual cornucopia of late 19th century commercial design. However, new developments threaten that character by insensitivity to the buildings that remain and the district itself. This special district should be preserved, with new buildings respectfully enhancing the character, not detracting from it.

SIGNIFICANCE



Early Boston was confined to a small peninsula, connected to the mainland by a small land bridge. Early settlers occupied the vicinity of Washington Street, originally named Marlborough Street, in order to remain close to the water and main road. As Boston's population grew, the peninsula expanded and downtown transformed into the heart and center of the city.

Beginning as a residential neighborhood, the Ladder Blocks eventually transformed into commercial, then into a mixed-use neighborhood.

The Great Boston Fire of 1872 acted as a catalyst for the initial commercial transformation of the downtown area. The fire destroyed over 500 buildings, leaving the city to rebuild. The new neighborhood thrived commercially and enjoyed decades of vibrancy.

The fire extinguished before Washington Street, so many pre-fire buildings remain in the Ladder Blocks, adding to the historical significance of the area.

Although now housing modern businesses, restaurants, and residencies, a majority of the buildings retain their original character and exterior architecture.

A nucleus of history and importance



Historically significant

The Freedom Trail
Park Street Church
Granary Burying Ground
King's Chapel and Burying Ground
Boston Latin School (Old City Hall)
Old Corner Bookstore
Old South Meeting House

Elizabeth Peabody Bookstore
Paramount Theatre
Modern Theatre
Omni Parker House
Orpheum Theatre
Boston Opera House
20-30 Bromfield Street

Architecturally significant

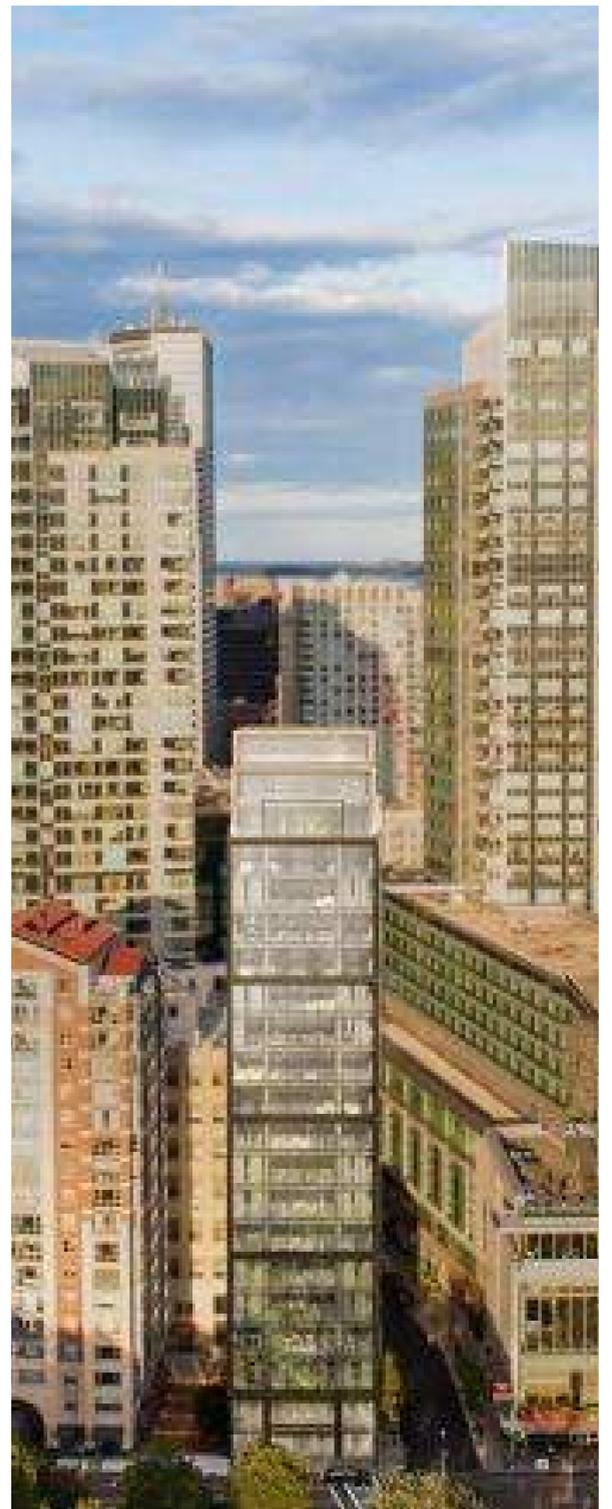


Outstanding examples of 18th to 19th century commercial Boston, typically decorated with brick or stone side-hall Federal row houses, including a rare surviving example of Egyptian motifs located at 20-30 Bromfield Street. The Theatre District displays magnificent examples of Victorian Gothic, Spanish Baroque, and Art Deco.



THREAT TO THE
LADDER BLOCKS

Ladder Blocks are currently threatened by insensitive, out of scale, and voluminous development. The area is not listed as a historic district, therefore there is no protection from development pressures. Several proposals have emerged over the past year, threatening to demolish whole or partial historic buildings.





One Bromfield

Consisting of four buildings total, the proposed project would demolish each building and develop a 59-story, 683-foot tower. The building will display a cylindrical shape, which completely disregards the neighborhood's character, scale, and design.

The project would replace a series of traditional storefronts with an unappealing garage and a private lobby.

Not only would this negatively effect the historic charm of the neighborhood, but the project would also negatively impact the amount of shadows, wind, sky view, and traffic.

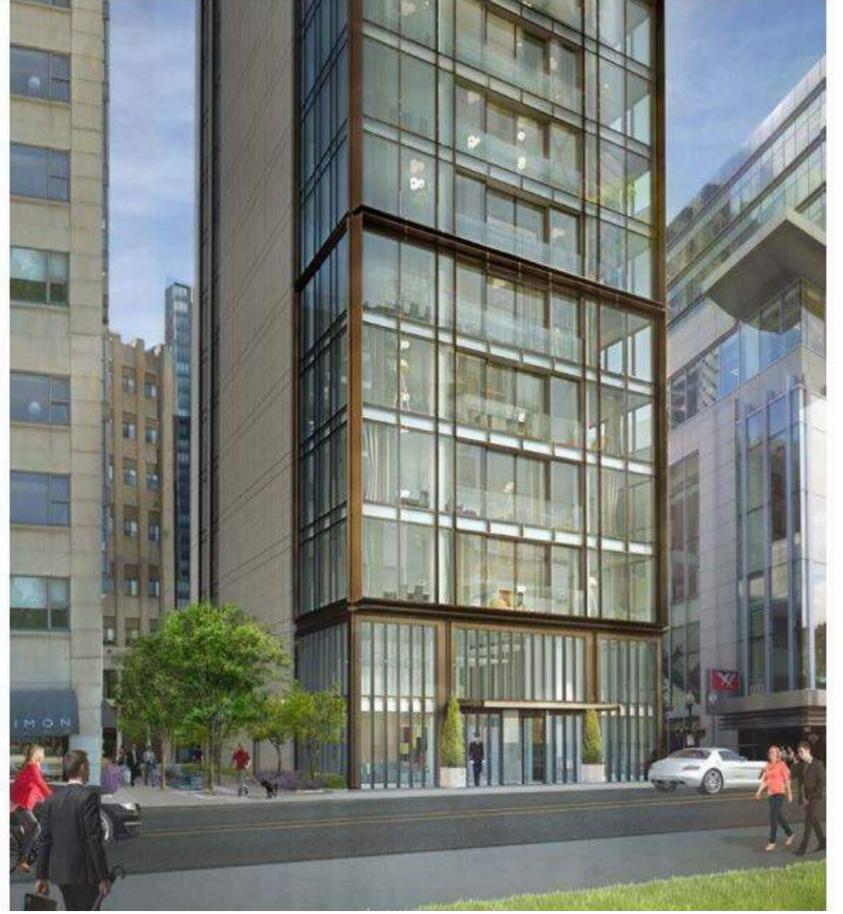


533 Washington Street

This proposal includes the historic Weed Sewing Machine Company/Adams House Building and Restaurant, which is located adjacent to historic Washington Street Theatres.

The aesthetically significant façade will remain, however the rest of the building would be completely demolished in order to construct a 30-story, 305-foot "pencil tower". A modern building rising from a historic façade has become a theme in the Ladder Blocks; however the design looks artificial and out of place.

The height not only exceeds the allowable zoning code for the neighborhood, it would also overpower and dominate the historic theatres and streetscape.



171 Tremont Street

171 Tremont Street, like many other proposed projects, hopes to be a tall and skinny luxury condo unit that faces towards the famous Boston Common.

However, the 212-foot building would create a significant amount of shadow on the Common.

The proposed project would consume a large amount of remaining cumulative allowable shadow on the Common, leaving many places in the dark and stripping future projects of beneficial public space.

This project is not only a large concern over shadows, but also of the sacrifices the general public must make for private, luxury housing.

SUPPORT AND
FUTURE EFFORTS

The Ladder Blocks is quickly evolving into a hotly desired neighborhood, attracting new businesses, residential buildings, and visitors. However, the area is still plagued with overdevelopment, unnecessary demolition, and inappropriate new construction.



Downtown Boston's appeal is generated by its historic character feel, along with pedestrian-friendly streets and shops. Unfortunately, the district is not protected under a National Register or Landmark. However, the best course of action at this time is to raise awareness of the historic and architectural significance of the Ladder Blocks.





The message of preservation must be carried to developers and investors, city agencies, neighborhood groups, local businesses, and residents in order to protect and enhance the Ladder Blocks.

To support for the Ladder Blocks, contact the Boston Preservation Alliance by calling or emailing at:

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PHOTOS

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Page 3: Winter Street, courtesy of Shelby Snyder.

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Page 6: Commercial Row, courtesy of Shelby Snyder.

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