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The Materiality of Place: Brick and Concrete in Twentieth-Century Boston

For a period of roughly twenty years during the mid-twentieth century, Boston architects and builders largely abandoned the previously preferred red brick and favored a raw concrete aesthetic, a choice driven by a strong moral and philosophical school of thought. Despite its sudden rise in prevalence within the community, though, modern concrete architecture fell out of favor nearly as quickly as it had come into it. In turn, red brick returned to its place as Boston's preferred building material. Concrete's role within the city, both symbolic and physical, was lost. But as the current status of Boston's modern concrete architecture begins to return to community consciousness today, the role of the material becomes a point of focus yet again. What were the conditions that led to the rise of concrete, and what happened within the city to lead to its decline? To answer these questions, we must look again at Boston's architectural history with critical eyes. Re-inserting concrete into the architectural continuum is key to ensuring the acceptance of modern concrete architecture as a valid stylistic moment within the city, one that is worthy of preservation and recognition. In order to do this, we must be able to understand the relationship between brick and concrete and how the two materials came to stand for very different ideas of the city.

To fully understand how red brick came to define Boston's architectural landscape, it is important to trace its early roles within the city. In the years following the American Revolution, Boston was a "pleasant, uncrowded seaport" characterized by small homes surrounded by gardens, typical of that time period.¹ Extant built fabric from this period is

¹ Whitehill, Walter Muir & Lawrence W. Kennedy. Boston: A Topographical History. Third Edition. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University. 2000. pg. 50

limited due to a series of disastrous fires throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that consistently destroyed wood constructions. In an effort to minimize the effects of the numerous fires, the General Court passed a law in 1803 requiring all buildings exceeding ten feet in height be built of stone or brick or be covered with a noncombustible material, such as slate or tile.² This was the first legislative effort to combat the regular occurrence of fire in Boston, and it would also lay the foundation for the brick-dominated aesthetic that would come to characterize the city.

Boston was incorporated as a city in 1822. Around this time, industries such as shipping and manufacturing exploded within the city, resulting in unprecedented wealth and growth. The population that had been steadily growing since the town's founding exploded from less than 25,000 residents in 1800 to 136,881 by 1850.³ Part of the reason for the dramatic increase was the steadily growing immigrant population. As the state's primary seaport, most immigrants came through Boston, with many electing to stay in the city.⁴

During this time period, most new developments in Boston were constructed of brick. Stone was expensive to quarry, cut, and build with, and was therefore generally reserved for particularly important commissions, those intended to last for long periods of time.⁵ As a remarkably tough material to work with, granite did not lend itself well to ornament and was more suitable to austere, monolithic construction. Red brick, on the other hand, was less expensive and, as a versatile material to build with, was suitable for all kinds of

² Ibid.

³ Bunting, Bainbridge. Houses of Boston's Back Bay: An Architectural History 1840-1917. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University. 1967. pg. 9

⁴ Seidler, Jan. Victorian Boston Bicentennial Exposition. Boston 200. One Beacon Street, Boston MA 02108. pg. 5

⁵ For instance, the Charles Street Jail and Quincy Market.

projects. It allowed builders to explore the most fashionable styles with little difficulty or extraneous cost. The early to mid eighteenth century saw red brick's rise to prevalence within Boston as the direct result of its utilitarian qualities- as a material that complied with the 1803 law and was both inexpensive and versatile, it was the ideal solution for the rapidly growing city.

The late nineteenth century was a crucial time for the formation of a general national identity. It was during this time that a notion of what it meant to be an American, and equally so what it meant to be from Boston, began to take form. The Centennial in 1876 brought with it a renewed interest in the concept of a national identity, shifting popular favor towards local revival styles as opposed to the previously fashionable European-derived forms such as the French Second Empire Style. Revival architecture began to acquire particular significance in Boston during this time period, thanks in no small part to its visual relationship to the historical buildings that Bostonians were growing to value as direct links to their historic past.⁶ In a national context, the images of the prerevolutionary past and the time directly thereafter had become part of a national myth. For the rest of the country, this was the image of clapboard and the picket fence just outside of town. For Boston, it was red brick. In the early days, brick had been utilized for its ease and for its relatively low cost- ultimately, it derived its place within the society for its utilitarian capabilities. In the later years of the nineteenth century, though, brick came to be valued for its symbolic role as the stuff Boston was, quite literally, made of.

⁶ Seidler, Jan. Victorian Boston Bicentennial Exposition. Boston 200. One Beacon Street, Boston MA 02108. pg. 2-3

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Boston had begun to transition from a cosmopolitan center motivated by change to a complacent metropolis, more concerned with maintenance than with innovation. William Dean Howells, a writer originally from the Midwest who was drawn to Boston for its celebrated literary community, remarked on the overarching conservatism found during the late Victorian period: “She would rather perish by fire and sword than be suspected of vulgarity; a critical, fastidious Boston, dissatisfied with the rest of the hemisphere.”⁷ Popular images of the time depicted a vision of idealized colonial Bostonians, replete with fashionable dress and tastefully furnished spaces.⁸ A particular image of Colonial New England, cultivated by nostalgic depictions and an increased awareness of the city’s historical significance, began to resonate within Boston as a major theme in upper class society. Historical associations, particularly those relating to the glorious early days of the Republic, became paramount to the foundation of a Boston identity. The city became marked by political corruption and architectural stagnation as the economic vitality and prosperity of the nineteenth century quickly faded to a memory, industries moving out to other locations with nothing to replace them in the local economy.

The early twentieth century also saw the widening of the ethnic divide within Boston. The smaller Brahmin class, despite being endowed with a degree of wealth not found in the Irish and working class communities, simply could not match them in sheer numbers. The political clout of the working class was proved when James Michael Curley, native son of the Irish community, was elected mayor in 1914. To some, Curley was a champion of the people, a “latter-day Robin Hood who stole from the rich and

⁷ Victorian Boston. pg. 2

⁸ Truettner, William H. and Thomas Andrew Denenberg. “The Discreet Charm of the Colonial” Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory. pg. 91

powerful to help the poor and needy.”⁹ His critics viewed him as “an ignorant and venal spoilsman, the practitioner of a loutish, brutal, opportunistic, offensive political style.”¹⁰ He won much favor amongst the poor and the working class, while the wealthy bristled at his purported attacks on Brahmin society.

The Great Depression put the expansion of Boston’s public transportation system and streetcar suburbs on hold. The rise of the automobile decreased the incentive to invest in new railroad lines, and the housing market fell into decline.¹¹ Though Boston had once been a thriving shipping and manufacturing center, other northeast cities had overtaken it as major ports. The manufacturing trades had shifted to other areas of the country, most notably the textile industry to New York and to the south.¹² The wealthy were apparently uninterested in downtown development and elected not to invest in new buildings in the city center. This contributed to the creation of a vicious cycle- the lack of industrial and economic growth negated the need for any major downtown development, while the lack of any major downtown development discouraged the growth of any form of industry. By the time James Curley’s time as mayor came to a close in 1949, the city had endured a long reign of corruption and mismanagement that left it bruised and distrustful of its elected officials.

In 1959, John Collins was elected to the mayoral seat. Collins quickly made Boston’s rebirth one of his top priorities, and set about engaging the individuals that would help make this goal a reality. By the end of the 1950s, decades of corruption and the loss of industry had crippled the city’s economy and driven away great numbers of the

⁹ Kennedy, Lawrence W. Planning the City Upon a Hill: Boston Since 1630. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press. 1992. pg. 142

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kennedy. Planning the City Upon a Hill: Boston Since 1630. pg. 129

¹² Ibid.

population. By the end of the 1950s, the city faced a population decrease of over 100,000 people.¹³ However, the new administration was hungry to prove itself as the one that would usher in the “new Boston,” and was willing to take drastic measures to turn around the flagging city. Concurrently, the first generation of architects trained as Modernists were in practice around the city and the country. These architects, trained in integrated design and taught to look at social context and the betterment of society as major design influences, were readily available to help Collins, newly appointed City Development Administrator Edward Logue, and the rest of the city government reshape Boston into the city of the future.

For Boston to re-establish itself as a major city after the decline of the previous decades, change within the city would need to take place on a massive scale. Urban renewal offered the unprecedented opportunity to literally wipe the slate clean. The biggest project of the Collins era was the development and construction of the new Government Center, a massive urban renewal project meant to serve as the ultimate symbol of the Collins-era New Boston. Architect/Urban Planner I.M. Pei was enlisted to design the master plan for the new government center, creating a plan that reduced the number of streets in the area from twenty-two to six, preserve key historic structures in the area, and that would highlight the new City Hall as the focal point of the plan. The site that was chosen for the new Government Center was Scollay Square, the formerly genteel neighborhood that had fallen into decline throughout the twentieth century and that had become a center for vice and illustrious pursuits. If the Collins administration could successfully redevelop Scollay Square, they would achieve a victory both symbolic

¹³ Kennedy. Planning the City Upon a Hill: Boston Since 1630. pg. 157

and tangible. Not only would the city be rid of its most notorious district, the installation of a bold new government center in its place would be a powerful metaphor for the ability of the government to overcome the ills of the city.

Concrete, a material both ancient and modern, would come to define the New Boston. The two dominant strains of modern architecture in America at the mid-twentieth century were best distinguished by their differences in material and in form. The glass and steel of the so-called “International Style” won acclaim for its sleek aesthetic, an almost radical minimalism expressed in its glossy surfaces. Glass and steel structures tended to be the domain of corporate architecture. Civic architecture, on the other hand, was better suited to a form language that was substantial and solid, not transparent or glassy. In the nineteenth century, granite had been the ideal material for this type of building. The twentieth century, with all of its challenges and innovations, enabled the development of new building and material technologies. Concrete quickly became the ideal material for Boston’s new developments.

The development of the culture of concrete was ultimately the product of the Collins administration’s attempts to cultivate a new Boston. As a modern material, concrete was ideal to represent the multiple layers of the city seeking an appropriate 20th century identity. Concrete also brought with it symbolic associations of a material that was simultaneously new and old, able to both claim a place within the historic city and stand apart from it. Red brick, the material of traditional Beacon Hill and the Back Bay, carried too many associations with Boston’s history of class and ethnic divides to serve as the literal and symbolic building block of the city’s rebirth. Concrete offered a complete representational shift from the brick tradition, a new material to build the new Boston in.

The new concrete modernism conveyed a sense of permanence and stoicism, and buildings designed in this style were viewed as monuments to civic aspiration and optimism in the vein of classical edifices. It was an ideal idiom in which to construct the modern city. As a material, concrete fit in well both with Boston's tradition of masonry construction and with its interest in progressiveness and with the architecture of the future.

By the end of the decade, Collins' tenure as Mayor of Boston was coming to a close. The question of who would succeed him became particularly pressing by 1967, as the new tensions within the city began to come to the forefront. Racial tensions within the city, exacerbated by the divisions created by the new social classes and spatial divides created within the city by urban reconfiguration, were quickly coming to a head. Kevin White, former Secretary of the Commonwealth, was elected to succeed Collins. He took office in 1968, ushering in the next chapter of the creation of the New Boston.

In the mid-twentieth century, Boston experienced a renewed interest in change, the likes of which had not been seen since nearly a century prior. The New Boston was one of massive change, and of tremendous optimism. The city that emerged at the end of the process, though, did not see the effects promised by the architects and the local government. The onset of the 1970s signified the beginning of the end for modern concrete architecture in Boston. The philosophical implications of the heady combination of the style and the material had proved quixotic in the 1960s, when so much energy and attention was focused on rebirth and the development of the city of the future. However, the 1970s saw the general disintegration of the ideal as social issues, economic crisis, and changing taste all contributed to the overall abandonment of the modern concrete

movement within the city. Like the Boston of the mid-nineteenth century, the New Boston had rebuilt itself in the name of progress, in the image of the city it wanted to become. Yet in both instances the city grew cautious, bringing abundant redevelopment to a slower pace and favoring a more restrained approach to development. The Vietnam War decreased the amount of federal funding available for urban renewal projects just as competition for this funding was increasing.¹⁴ Private development tended to favor a more corporate architectural vocabulary- namely, the glass and steel constructions, a stark contrast to the more solid forms favored by the modern concrete movement. The association with urban renewal was one of the first nails in the modern concrete coffin. The aggressive policies and dramatic actions favored by Collins and Logue had saved Boston from its depths, but had irrevocably altered the landscape of the city and its social conditions. When it had been successful, urban renewal had been able to create grand public spaces and beloved urban settings, bold symbols of New Boston's ascension back to greatness. Flagging areas were revitalized and remade into treasured sites. Boston's waterfront, for example, had been completely redeveloped during this period and quickly became one of the most popular urban renewal sites in the city. When it had faltered, though, urban renewal had the ability to decimate vibrant communities and destroyed beloved neighborhoods. For example, the West End effort, described by Boston Globe architecture critic Robert Campell as "a carpet bomb of urban renewal, an amputation by the city of its own flesh," highlighted the very real implications of its failures.¹⁵ The failed efforts did more to highlight ethnic, racial, and class distinctions

¹⁴ Robertson, Nan. "Beautification: Planners Fear Vietnam Will Drain Urban Grants" *New York Times*, July 4, 1967. pg. 15

¹⁵ Campbell, Robert. "Phantom Pain: A Neighborhood Lives On After its Destruction" *Architectural Record*, April 2006. Vol. 194, No. 4. Pgs. 63-64

than the successful ones did to ameliorate them, and the 1970s saw heightening tensions within the city as a result. The muscular gray modern concrete buildings, constructed during the same time period and often in association with urban renewal, took on a distinctly unfavorable reputation as aesthetic representation of the much-maligned movement.

By the third quarter of the twentieth century, Bostonians began to actively develop a historical awareness in reaction to the purported failings of the modern city. Boston's Landmarks Law was adopted in 1975, finally establishing clear legal standing for the protection and maintenance of the city's historic structures. With the implementation of the Boston Landmarks legislation, architecture could suddenly be understood as belonging to one of two distinct camps: the historic and the modern. Significance could be understood in terms of age in addition to architectural merit or social value. Conversely, the modern movement was able to define itself in opposition to what was now highlighted as historic, the architecture of the "before." Brick, as the prevalent material of historic Boston, could now be recognized as a signifier of age and, by extension, of value. Once again it was elevated to a nearly reverent status, viewed as the very indicator of age and local gentility.

The 1976 Bicentennial marked an important turning point in the history of Boston's architecture. Modernism had grown stale and the city sought a fresh new current which to ascribe. At the same time, the entire country was awash with a renewed sense of interest in the nation's early days. Particularly in Boston, historicism rocketed to favor as the city residents looked to the past as a source of pride, particularly as a respite from their

current issues. Red brick was familiar, safe. It was the material of Boston when Boston was a center of commerce, industry, and culture, where concrete had come to be associated with a time of urban upheaval and social strife. Red brick was, in essence, a safety blanket for a city terrified of its own monsters. The stark monumentality of concrete had become a liability, the face of urban renewal and, by extension, urban strife and the destruction of the urban community. Major restoration projects, such as the Trinity Church, the Boston Public Library, and Ben Thompson's Faneuil Hall "festival marketplace" responded to the desire to return to the glorious past and further solidified the city's attraction to the historic styles and materials of decades past.¹⁶

As Boston's fascination with concrete faded, the material's symbolic power was lost. People rejected the overall aesthetic, both form and color, that was associated with a moment in history when the commonly accepted narrative of brick and historicism was superseded by a new one, a different way of thinking that was so bold that it could not be realized in the traditional vocabulary. Once the sense of urgency of the mid-twentieth century passed, all that was left were the buildings and the bad memories- the challenges of urban renewal, etc- without the context to give them value. Bostonians were not merely rejecting a material (concrete is historical) or a color (granite is also gray) or a form language (the moderns), but rather the aesthetic that had come to stand for the relatively brief moment when historicism was not the ideal and when extreme social, economic, and political conditions forced a new way of understanding the world. These reactions must be counteracted with a general revision of the popular understanding of the modern concrete movement.

¹⁶ Shand-Tucci, Douglass. Built in Boston: City and Suburb, 1800-2000. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press. 1999. pg. 307

At present, there are few concrete buildings in Boston that are in immediate danger of demolition. A sluggish economy has postponed most major projects, granting many buildings in the city temporary immunity. This will not always be the case, though, and when the economy rebounds many of the buildings at the center of hypothetical debates could be in very real danger. Currently, neglect and general poor maintenance pose the greatest threats to the buildings: factors less dramatic than a looming wrecking ball, but ultimately no less destructive. The task of “saving” these buildings is not a matter of forming emergency citizen’s groups to rise up at the eleventh hour to stand in front of a bulldozer, but rather formulating a system that will keep an eye to the future while still responding to the very real needs of the present.

The challenge of rehabilitating, reintegrating, and re-appreciating Boston’s modern concrete heritage may seem daunting, even after we have adjusted our ways of thinking about the buildings. Physically, the sheer immovability of concrete does not lend itself easily to reuse, making it difficult to re-imagine many of these structures as anything other than what they were intended to be. An elegant solution will need to take several key factors into consideration, which will range from philosophical issues to the issues associated with the actual physical restoration work itself.

Before any work can begin, Boston’s modern concrete architecture’s role within the city’s historical continuum must be recognized. By acknowledging the Modern concrete movement’s significance in Boston’s architectural history, we commit ourselves to maintaining the buildings with the same care and respect that would be shown to any other landmark. The fact that not every Bostonian finds Modern concrete architecture to be aesthetically pleasing should not be a deterrent; a traditional definition of beauty is not

a part of the criteria in determining the significance of a building, and acknowledging this principle allows us to move beyond our preconceived notions of the value of beauty in the process of determining historical importance.

One of the most prevalent methods of offering protection to historically significant structures is to secure landmark designation on either the local or national level. This offers recognition of the significance of the resource, and often brings a host of benefits ranging from eligibility for restoration-based tax incentives to protection from unsympathetic alterations or demolition. Landmarking, a passive form of preservation, would be useful as a preventative measure. However, it would not take action to ameliorate any of the real issues currently facing many of these buildings. It is also important to remember that not all modern concrete buildings in Boston would qualify for individual landmark designation, and that the remaining buildings will require maintenance and protection as well. A comprehensive preservation plan must take these factors into consideration and not rely upon listing alone to provide Boston's modern concrete with the protection it requires. While landmark designation should be utilized for as many structures as possible, it should not be regarded as the best or only option for the protection of Boston's concrete. Once the buildings are understood as being part of Boston's historic lexicon, it will be much easier to craft a compelling argument for their preservation. Boston needs a project that will stimulate interest in and explain the significance of the style. For instance, the restoration of City Hall could serve as a "guiding light" for future projects.

In order to accept the significance of this period in Boston's architectural history, we return to the necessity of redirecting our thinking. Boston's Modern concrete movement

must be understood as embodying a different set of thought processes than other significant buildings in the Boston area. In order to begin to adequately preserve Modern concrete architecture in Boston and across the world, we must begin to shift our approach. Community education is an important step in ensuring the preservation of Modern concrete architecture. It's not simply a matter of changing how Boston views its concrete architecture, but also of changing how Boston views itself. The great tradition of urban transformation is a major piece of Boston's history and is generally underrepresented in the city's interpretations of itself.

Greater use of interpretation should be employed to begin the process of educating the public about Boston's modern concrete architecture. There should be a compelling story developed about the creation of the New Boston and of its precedents and implications. The buildings should be celebrated as being of their time, and the various interpretive methods should reinforce what that actually means. For instance, a self-guided walking tour in the vein of the Freedom Trail could be developed that would visit and celebrate the numerous mid-century sites around the city. Specifically designed educational materials would illustrate the conditions of the sites before the urban renewal efforts took place and discuss how and why these changes were made.¹⁷ Another way to increase community interest in the buildings would be to offer in-depth guided tours of individual buildings and complexes. If we are to gain the attention and, in turn, the sympathy of the general public, we must tell compelling stories. Modern concrete architecture was treated as a symbol of the end of Boston's nearly half-century depression, and the story behind its rise to prominence in the city is complicated. The drama of the movement's rise, the

¹⁷ Possible options include maps, brochures, signage, and technological options, such as a specially-designed website or a Smartphone walking tour.

exhilaration of its prominence in the city's architectural landscape, and the disaster of its downfall: all of these factors together create a heady tale full of intrigue, action, and drama. The story of the modern concrete movement in Boston is compelling on its own; making that story accessible to the general public is key to increasing awareness and appreciation of the movement's specific social and cultural connotations.

The time to begin thinking about the preservation and restoration of Boston's modern concrete architecture is now. The buildings offer great opportunities for the city to understand its own history and heritage in a new and more nuanced way, and the number of possible treatment options for them proves that there is no reason to not take every possible measure to ensure their protection and preservation. Community education and continued, conscientious maintenance, coupled with thoughtful alterations and additions where necessary, will prove to be the most effective course of action. While the suggested guidelines can be applied to any restoration project, they should be utilized to the greatest degree possible to ensure the best results in the restoration of modern concrete architecture. The preservation of modern concrete architecture is as much about protecting the ethos of the buildings as it is the physical material. Ultimately, the successful preservation of modern concrete buildings in Boston and beyond requires an approach that is sensitive to the historical and social context of the design and a careful treatment to the particularities of concrete repair.

As the modern concrete movement becomes history, more attention is being paid to establishing the style as a valid architectural moment. More so than a question of taste, concrete buildings should be evaluated for their larger role within the community, for what they can teach us about the recent past and our own history. We must recognize that

the methods by which we value architecture are based upon an intricate web of cultural and social factors, that these methods are contingent upon our shared experiences, and that they are subject to change as time marches on. To assume that because a building does not fit within the taste culture of a particular moment does not mean that it is without merit or value. While Modern concrete architecture has not yet necessarily achieved canonical historical value, its role within the development and history of Boston suggests that someday it will. Until then, it is our responsibility to continue to act as the stewards of the city's architectural heritage and to protect the buildings for the benefit of the community and for future generations.

Boston is in possession of one of the foremost collections of modern concrete architecture in the world. The loss of Boston's modern concrete heritage would undoubtedly prove to be a major loss to the city, and to the nation as a whole. The time is now to begin taking stock of the buildings and starting the work of protecting and preserving them, not for the handful of professionals that find value in them now but for the generations that will recognize how significant they are in the future.

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