URBAN DESIGN TACTICS

Transformation of Boston's Midtown Cultural District
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Prelude

WASHINGTON STREET CORRIDOR

The commercial heart of Boston on lower Washington Street has a rich history of retail and entertainment, dating from the Civil War and reaching its heyday in the 1940’s.
1910s
Washington Street

1930s
Theater District
Filene’s and Jordan Marsh were the anchors of this retail vitality. Just south of these department stores were the Keith, Modern, Gayety, and a dozen other stage theaters, and later larger movie houses such as the Paramount.
1960-1980

**Combat Zone Days**

Post War suburbanization drained the city’s commercial energy, and a shift in entertainment from theater and cinema to television precipitated the decline of a vibrant Theater District into the tawdry and notorious “Combat Zone” of crime, prostitution, and X-rated cinemas.

Retailers struggled in this environment; the city made several somewhat successful attempts to clean up the district through major urban renewal projects such as pedestrian street malls and several above grade-parking garages to facilitate commuters for shopping. “Downtown Crossing” was a re-branding effort to stimulate investment and alter the shopping experience using the then-popular “street mall”, closing off traffic around the Filene's block.
FROM TRADITIONAL BLOCK TO SUPER BLOCK

Beginning in the mid-1970’s, several very large development proposals were made. Consisting of new and larger retail and commercial office space, these proposals dramatically altered Washington Street.

Failed Urban Renewal
With Urban Renewal in the 1960’s, streets were repositioned or widened to facilitate downtown traffic for the suburbanites being lured back for shopping and entertainment. But these investments fell short in execution, and created only urban “stasis”: the Combat Zone was essentially contained in the “hinge” between the remaining Theater District and the traditional Commercial District. Pedestrian activity was mostly concentrated in the Downtown Crossing area, which remained vital due to office commuters and the confluence of subway connections.

Lafayette Place
Lafayette Place, positioned adjacent to Jordan Marsh and absorbing several blocks, became a mega-project with over 300,000 sf of retail, restaurants, and a 500 room hotel. The complex basically turned its back on the street, focusing the main retail event on the central round dining courtyard – a circular variation on the classic linear suburban mall. Minimal display windows dotted the perimeter and a submerged hotel port-cochere, coupled with the loss of street facades due to the super-block, drained vital pedestrian activity from the street.
The city was looking for ways to re-build the activity of this district, and its first major Planned Development Area was for what became known as the Midtown Cultural District. Significant zoning envelopes were created by the city that were intended to lure developers to the area (Article 38, Boston Zoning Code).

Certain protections were created to protect the environment of major open spaces such as the Common, Old Burial Ground, and some of the historic landmarks, mostly north of the District.

Building massing emphasized urban street wall continuity, active and visible storefronts, setbacks for daylight to the street, and a range of permitted uses including multi-family residential.
FROM SUPER BLOCK TO MEGA BLOCK

During the 1980’s a series of major proposals on Washington Street sought to expand on the retail and commercial investment already made at Lafayette Place, which began to fail from the day it opened its doors. Essentially, the city endorsed a “doubling-down” on the intensified retail/commercial model for urban revitalization.

The Recession of 1991-92 permanently arrested both projects. The anticipated mix of retail, hotels, and commercial office was impossible to finance during the early 1990’s recovery. Empty lots remained as nagging reminders of a still stalled Washington Street revitalization.

1987: Boston Crossing
The Boston Crossing project included replacing Jordan Marsh with a Bloomingdale’s department store and an office tower at Summer Street, and another 30-story office tower on the now empty site abutting Hayward Place. Bracketing the Swiss Hotel at Lafayette Place, the 7.4 acre complex proposed a continuous façade of “big-box” retail on the east side of Washington, punctuated with office lobbies only at the street corners.

1988: Commonwealth Center
Almost concurrent with Boston Crossing, on the west side of Washington Street at Avery, the Commonwealth Center was a proposed 1.7 million SF project with office, hotel, and retail. The adjacent Paramount Theater would be re-furbished as part of a new entertainment program with additional movie theaters. The internalized shopping experience included a skylit atrium connecting Washington Street to Tremont and The Common. A hotel would flank the atrium, and office towers would straddle both sides of Avery Street.
REFINE THE URBAN DESIGN STRATEGY

Two decades of incomplete or failed renewal in the Midtown Cultural District was not just the result of several recessions. It can be traced to a failure to see the paradigm shift occurring in mixed use development.

Internalized functions (the classic mall atrium), coupled with a mono-culture of retail/commercial in direct competition with the already established Financial District and the Back Bay, could not on its own create a vibrant, 24-hour neighborhood.

Residential development, of sufficient scale, was needed to complement these uses to invest the street with pedestrian activity during non-store hours. And the mixed-use building needed to externalize the activity, moving residents and visitors in and out of street lobbies to get to different parts of the building.

**Change the Mix: The Residential Hybrid Building**

The Residential Hybrid Building organizes a dense mix of heterogeneous functions into a single entity which, if properly organized, positively impacts the vitality of the street.

The cycle of who comes and goes, and where they enter along the street, during the course of a day or week can invigorate the pedestrian experience.

When carefully calibrated in size and occupancy, the Hybrid Building acts like an Urban Mega-vitamin, with the power to stimulate the neighborhood with new smaller scale peripheral development.
Retail: destination & spending - incidental & spontaneous interaction - 18hrs/day
Residential: destination - relaxing - entertaining - resting - 12hrs/day (night time)
Hotel: destination - relaxing - spending - resting - 12hrs/day (day time)
Transit: transition - ground oriented - constant motion - 24hrs/day
Specific tactical design “operations” are employed to organize the building massing, re-enforce street activity, and locate the high-rise portions of the program in a meaningful civic design solution. This required careful reading of the existing context and interpretation of the cues latent in the existing mix of building types and scales.

**TACTICAL URBAN DESIGN**

**Reading the Context: The Syncopated Street Wall**

From State Street south to Boylston, Washington Street is characterized by a syncopated street rhythm of varying cornice lines and street fronts. Most structures are 45-60’ tall. There is another datum at about 100-130’ (600 Washington and Filenes), and then a few in the 300’ range from the late 1960’s and early 70’s (Tremont on the Common and Swiss Hotel).

The west face of Washington retained this irregular rhythm of narrow frontages, some with deep upper court recesses. The east side is notable for extended regularity of 90’ street wall from Summer (Macy’s) to Hayward Place (Lafayette Place), bracketed by the 130’ high buildings at the remote corners of the Avery block and the Jeweler’s Exchange at Bromfield St.
The Boston Crossing project implied a neo-classical solution at the intersection of the Avery and Washington, but was rendered ambiguous by the adjacent atrium. The street wall for the most part was retained as it bended southward. Continuity and polite setbacks – imbedded in the zoning – softened the “tower on podium” solution.

**Urban Pivot Point**

Millennium Place resolved the intersection by creating a pavilion (AKA “The Basket”) to act as a pivot point at the south end of the straight street corridor, the other end defined by the steeple of the Old South Meeting house. This irregular semi-rotunda is a 90’ glass enclosed pavilion facing out to the street. Intended initially as one of two cinema entries, it houses a restaurant above, retail on the ground floor, and a fitness studio in the middle.
The Articulated Street Wall

Post War suburbanization drained the city’s commercial energy, and a shift in entertainment from theater and cinema to television precipitated the decline of a vibrant Theater District into the tawdry and notorious “Combat Zone” of crime, prostitution, and X-rated cinemas.

Retailers struggled in this environment; the city made several somewhat successful attempts to clean up the district through major urban renewal projects such as pedestrian street malls and several above grade-parking garages to facilitate commuters for shopping. “Downtown Crossing” was a re-branding effort to stimulate investment and alter the shopping experience using the then-popular “street mall”, closing off traffic around the Filene’s block.
The Avery Street Gateway

At the pedestrian scale, cornice gestures and a re-clad glass “gatehouse” at 172 Tremont were devised to frame the entry from The Common into Avery. Street paving and tree planting further defined either end of Avery Street.
**Animating - Inducing Pedestrian Street Activity**

The street is the primary conduit of public experience of urban space. Pedestrians and vehicles compete in a complex ballet of movement: congestion, in moderation, is a good thing to vitalize the neighborhood, socially and economically. Multiple points of entry, with varying uses, are created around the perimeter of the site. The Hybrid Building induces the users to return to the street before going back in for a different function in another location in the same structure.
Avery Street Frontage

Millennium Place is formed to create an active frontage of hotel, residential, retail, and restaurant spaces. The streetscape of Avery Street links both sides of the development, including the “out-lots”, to provide a spatially coherent experience. Paving and landscape details re-enforce the axial nature of the street.
Threshold - the “Tower Cousins”

At the city scale, the stone-clad rectilinear towers bracket Avery Street 75’ apart, reinforcing the threshold experience between the open expanse of The Common and the imbedded density of Washington Street. Each contains a prismatic glass and metal portion, rotating about the stone towers.

The South Block presents a broad face to the park and North Block a narrow edge to the north. The latter draws the eye to the Paramount Theater, and a shallow set back re-enforces the syncopated character of Washington Street. The Towers are not simple mirror images, but rather "cousins" with similar features differentiated in scale.
The Neighborhood Reenergized
Peripheral Development

2005

- 33 Arch Street
- 1 Lincoln Street Office
- Apartment Conversion
- Suffolk University
- Modern Theater (Suffolk University)
- Opera House Renovation
- Emerson College Renovation + Addition
- Majestic Theater Renovation + Addition
- Colonial Theater (Emerson College)
Phase 2 of Millennium Place allowed the same team to build on many of the same urban design principles that were executed in Phase 1.

Urban Pivot Point
Originally conceived as an office building, Phase 2 became a 256-unit residential building featuring masonry walls and lattice frames offset by glass and metal.
FILENE’S AND DOWNTOWN CROSSING

By the mid 2000’s, incremental investment and re-vitalization on the southern portion of the District began to achieve a self-sustaining vitality in the neighborhood.

But the national consolidation of department stores coupled with competition with Big Box operations and a steady increase in internet shopping, led to the collapse of the Filene’s brand in 2006.

Intensifying Connections

A consequence of the “Big Dig” – the decade-long dismantling of the elevated Expressway to reconnect the waterfront to the historic downtown – was an opportunity for the city to encourage pedestrian and transit links between both. Both Summer and Franklin streets could be linked directly to the waterfront, and public transit and pedestrian improvements could enhance development activity along these corridors. The Filene’s block is situated between both streets. When the venerable store closed its doors for good, it precipitated a competition to build on this key site.

Fertile Ground: Summer and Washington Streets

The intensity of pedestrian activity during business hours is a remarkable feature of this location. Despite the uneven commercial and retail operations, the foot traffic, due in part to the various subway transfers below, has the highest number of pedestrians in the city. This fact alone provided confidence that a major redevelopment, if properly calibrated, could build on the success of Millennium Place to the south.
THE BURNHAM BUILDING AND MILLENNIUM TOWER

One Franklin takes shape amidst a booming economy during 2006-2008. It is heavily weighted with commercial space and hotel. Residential programming constitutes a minority of the project. Critically, while the development retains the facades of Daniel Burnham’s 1912 landmark building, it hollows out the inside for a hotel atrium, and the office/residential tower straddles the old building.

The city applauds the mix of residential and hotel, certain concessions are made to preserve a building façade at Hawley and Franklin St, but no attempt is made to restore the historic Burnham storefronts which were trend-setting when first installed.

Deja-Vu All Over Again

2008: The Great Recession intervenes. The interior of Filene’s is gutted, the adjacent buildings demolished, and excavation begun. Not unlike the recession of 1991-92 which stalled Boston Crossing and Commonwealth Center, the Great Recession halted the work in its tracks.

The city waited patiently for the rebound and for the project to restart, but the developer lost the appetite for continuing. The resultant “Big Hole” became a stark reminder of all that had been lost in this important district of the city.
Re-think the Proposition
In 2010, the City solicits new proposals to kick start the project. The same development and design team for Millennium Place is selected.

Two key ingredients are changed to make the project financially viable:
- Applying for historic tax credits through a faithful restoration of the Filene’s building exterior,
- Re-calibrate the program mix of uses eschewing a hotel and emphasizing a substantial increase in residential density.

Massing Strategy
The massing strategy recognizes the Burnham Building as an urban “set piece”, unique in form, capable of defining the immediate surroundings through scale, materiality, and articulation. The Tower is thus “joined at the hip”, connecting the first three floors of the Burnham Building with retail uses, but clearly perceived as independent along the street wall and on the civic scale. The narrow proportions of the Tower are driven by the residential program.

Recalibrating the Program Mix
The overall size of the project is reduced. The emphasis on parking is reduced. The Burnham Building floor plates, with minor adjustments, prove to be a optimal size for commercial tenants.
**THE BURNHAM BUILDING AND MILLENNIUM TOWER: URBAN DESIGN TACTICS**

*Reading the Context: Washington Street East and the Franklin Crescent*

The east side of Washington Street is notable for the extended regularity of the 90’ street wall from Summer (Macy’s) to Hayward Place (Lafayette Place), bracketed by the 150’ high Millennium Place building (2012) and, on the northern end by the Arch Street Garage opposite the Jeweler’s Exchange at Bromfield St.

The Filene’s block north street wall is distinguished by the adjacent curvilinear Franklin St. rhythm of stone buildings that lead directly into Shopper’s Park.

Built on the outlines of Charles Bulfinch’s Tontine Crescent, the curvilinear frontages and steep incline of Franklin Street at Shopper’s Park established a modular scale for defining a new street wall facing the plaza.
Modulation - the Podium and Connector

The links between the Tower and Burnham Building require finesse in form, height, and materials. The all-glass concept of the Tower project uses contrast in materials with the existing terracotta Burnham façade. A 100' high shallow facetted podium creates continuity with the Franklin Crescent and mitigates the shear presence of the Tower.

The Podium glazing is patterned in a series of oscillating vertical bands to optically distinguish the modularity of the street wall. On Washington Street the Connector is defined in a similar motif of shallow inflected glass. It is scaled to match the lot line cornice position pre-1912, to re-establish the historic relationship between the Filene’s building and its neighbor.
Definition - Marking the Crossing
The Tower is facetted with a series of oblique corners, designed to articulate the shaft as a series of planes, each reflecting the sky differently thus breaking down the apparent width of the north and south facades. Composed of silvery semi-reflective glass in contrast to the predominately stone or masonry context, the Tower is positioned sufficiently apart from other mid- and high-rise structures to define Downtown Crossing on the civic scale.

Tower Form
The Tower facets augment the residential plans, taking advantage of views to south and west overlooking The Common. The wedge-shaped Tower follows the contours of the position of the core and circulation.
**Articulation: The Restored Storefront**

Daniel Burnham’s original storefront details included a continuous plate glass window system, hidden cove electric lighting, and both fixed cast-iron/glass and retractable awnings.

A rich materiality of marble, cast iron, bronze, and plate glass in a sophisticated rhythm of vertical and horizontal articulation was stripped off in the late 1950s and replaced by a solid, continuous canopy and strip windows. This effectively detached the storefront from the deeply incised classical details of the terracotta wall above.
ST01: Milford Granite Finish: Split Face
ST02: Milford Granite Finish: Honed
ST03: Granite Absolutely Black Finish: Polished
GL-12: Granite 112467 Bendheim
PT-XX: Benjamin Moore Affinite AF-480
1603 graphite
GL-11: Viracon 15/16" Pattern 62 VE-85 #3 Insulating HS/HS
3/16" pattern 62-Clear HS
1/2" Airspace - mill finish
1/4" CLear HS
VE-85 #3
AWNING Retractable awning
GL-11: Weather 15/16" Pattern 62 VE-85 #3 Insulating HS/HS
3/16" pattern 62-Clear HS
1/2" Airspace - mill finish
1/4" CLear HS
VE-85 #3
ENTRY DOOR Narrow Stile door Stainless steel 10" fan
AGA DOOR pivot patch: fit on one top corner
MP05: Sand Blasted stainless steel
VE-85 #3 Stainless steel
FT-05: Benjamin Moore Zoffany graphite
PT-05: Benjamin Moore Affinate AF-480
Restored
**Threshold - the Plaza as Gateway**

The western corner of the Tower is located to both turn the corner at Franklin and Washington, and define the threshold into Shopper’s Park. The uniform glazing of the Tower is firmly imbedded into this corner of the Park, framing a vertical set of retail fronts opening directly to the plaza, inviting visitors into the building.

The Shopper’s Park slope created a natural split of functions: the high elevation on Washington St. has open space for outdoor events, dining, and socializing; a new amphitheater covers the subway entrance at mid-slope; and a vehicle drop off for the residential lobbies is located on the lower elevation at Hawley Street. Stone retaining walls and planting platforms with seating negotiates complex grading and accessibility requirements.
Pedestrian Vitalization

Service docks remain in the same location on Hawley Street as Filene's 1912 and 1954 buildings. A new ramp to below grade parking is located in a former loading dock. The corners of Hawley are animated by either retail or residential lobbies. The new Burnham office lobby is located on Summer Street. The entire perimeter of Burnham and the Tower Podium is retail, with multiple points of entry, interspersed with existing subway entries. Basement and second floor retail will have dedicated street level entries. 4/5ths of the block is storefront or lobby doors with anticipated high volume pedestrian traffic.
The perceived illness of “urban blight” in 1950’s led to a cure worse than the disease: Urban Renewal, which typically did anything but. After several attempts to revitalize the Mid Town Cultural District in the 1980s with mega-projects that stalled, a new paradigm of development was belatedly recognized that provided a key to reviving the Washington Street commercial and theater district. Fundamental components or actions can be summarized as:

**Residential Hybrid Building**
The Residential Hybrid Building, calibrated to the right density, carefully tailored to fit into the fabric of the historic city, and balanced with attractive functions, was the catalyst for the city’s long-sought change.

**“Open System”**
An “Open System” of incremental development should be assumed and encouraged. The forced arrangement of the retail mall is a “closed system” precluding other players from participating. Peripheral activity (like boutiques, restaurants, cafes, small retail, and the like) cannot symbiotically grow easily nearby. A mixed-use development that nurtures its connections to the street will open other possibilities on nearby properties, spawning a natural accretion of smaller peripheral investment and improvements.

**Regulatory Jujitsu**
Urban design is a political process. Lengthy and detailed environmental review is rightly required to ensure zoning mandates are followed. Both Millennium Place and the Burnham Building/Millennium Tower built on such previous city approvals but made significant modifications by reducing the size, amount of vehicular traffic, and natural resources consumed (water and air quality). Both projects had to comply with strict shadow limitations already established. By accepting these limitations – and coopting political inertia - the public approval process was smoother and shorter, thereby jump-starting construction dates to hit the market in a timely way.
The accretion of new projects, either renovations or new construction, is illustrated on this map. Since 1998, when Millennium Place began construction, numerous projects have begun in the district. These include major investments by Emerson College and Suffolk University, new rental apartment buildings, residential loft conversions, a boutique hotel, new office spaces, and importantly renovation of several historic theaters.

Since Millennium Tower and the Burnham Building renovation was announced in 2012, a major office tenant is moving to the project, along with a new supermarket into the Filene’s Basement space. Other buildings along Washington Street are being renovated for new tenants.

The critical mass of the Residential Hybrid Building, coupled with careful urban design tactics, is bringing to fruition the social and political objectives originally envisioned 25 years ago in the Mid-Town Cultural District in downtown Boston.