



# HBI *nsights*

News From Historic Boston Incorporated • Winter 2003

## The Modern Theater: A Phoenix Rising?

The Modern Theater, a once-proud cultural space in Boston's thriving turn-of-the-century theater district, has suffered from such profound neglect over the past 20 years that the building's very existence is now threatened. While neighboring building projects—including planned rehabilitations of the Paramount Theater and the Opera House—herald a revitalization of the area, the Modern Theater has slipped further and further into disrepair. This is occurring despite the fact that all three were listed among the National Trust's eleven most endangered historic sites in 1995, and were the subject of a well-attended charrette which the Boston Preservation Alliance organized in 1995 to catalyze development.

This process reached crisis stage last May when the Henry H. Levin Trust, the owners of the Modern, asked the Boston Landmarks Commission to allow them to remove the top portion of the pediment due to serious instability. In response, the Commission designated the Modern a Boston Landmark, recording this at the Registry of Deeds on August 11th. On August 12th, the owners petitioned the Commission to demolish the building, while disassembling the façade for reconstruction later.

Historic Boston and the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) felt—and continue to feel strongly—that there are alternative solutions. At the eleventh hour, Historic Boston appealed to the Landmarks Commission to block demolition while we completed a study, with the BRA's



Modern Theater project team: standing (left to right): Carl A. Jay, Shawmut Design and Construction; Wendall C. Kalsow, McGinley Hart Architects; Anthony F. Papillo, HBI Project Manager; David McClaren Hart, architect; seated: Stanley M. Smith, HBI Executive Director; John M. Wathne and Beth Nathan, both of Structures North Consulting Engineers, Inc.

support, on how to eliminate the present hazards and preserve options to redevelop the building.

With the concurrence of the owners, the Landmarks Commission, and the BRA, Historic Boston's project team presented a report to the Commissioners on September 24th showing the means, methods, techniques, and costs for preserving the building and its façade for later use. Based upon this presentation, the Commission determined that the Modern could be preserved, and refused to allow demolition.

On November 8th, a judge ordered that, by November 22nd, either the owners demolish the building as a public hazard or the BRA, if it had acquired it, submit a plan to preserve public safety and the building. Historic Boston prepared a preservation plan

for the BRA to present to the judge, with engineers and contractors ready to start work, if the Authority acquires control of the building. As of this writing, the judge granted a two-week continuance so the BRA and the property owner could work out details of a transfer.

Meanwhile, Historic Boston's project team stands ready to begin the first step toward preserving this important Boston Landmark: stabilization to remove public safety hazards and preserve options for future development.

The architectural firm of Levi Newcomb and Son designed this 16,840 square-foot structure at 523 Washington Street in 1876 as a mercantile building. Originally known

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as the Dobson Building, it spent its first half-century as a carpet warehouse. In 1913, the well-known Boston entrepreneur and philanthropist George R. White hired Clarence H. Blackall, one of America's leading early 20th century theater architects, to add a theater on the lower floors for the presentation of "high class photo plays." Blackall designed a striking three-story, 800-seat auditorium that welcomed patrons with a graceful marble-faced arched entry.

The Modern was the first theater in Boston built without a stage—ensuring optimal visual experience of films—and the theater presented many memorable premieres, notably the Boston premier of *The Jazz Singer* in 1928. Blackall placed equal emphasis on sound quality, working closely with Harvard engineer Wallace Sabine to provide the finest acoustics for the live organ music that accompanied the films.

Today, the theater is barely recognizable. Plaster covers the floors. Water has freely entered the building

through the roof for years, destroying nearly all of the original ornate woodwork and plasterwork. Rehabilitation of the cinema may still be possible, however, and its reuse as a space for showing art films has been suggested.

The façade of the Modern Theater is constructed primarily of Nova Scotia sandstone, with brownstone trim from Portland, Connecticut. Vermont marble was added in the 1913 renovation. While the marble and the brownstone have not weathered as well as the sandstone, a majority of the stone façade is in good condition. The replacement of the brownstone would be relatively simple, and most of the marble could be re-used, though some of the fine detail is in danger of crumbling. However, the entablature, frieze, and cornice are in standard condition for marble of this design and age, and repairs could be completed without dismantling the entire building.

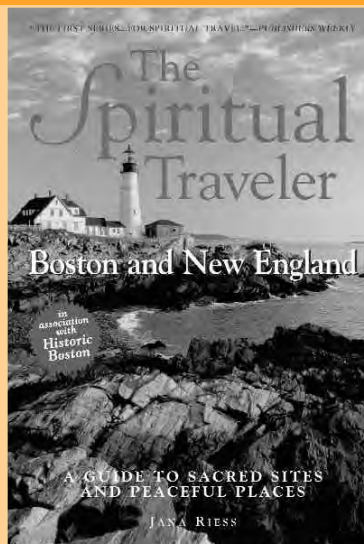
As the recent restoration of the Biltmore Theater in New York City proves, it can be done. Should it be? We at Historic Boston answer with a resounding yes! ●



Modern Theater façade as it appears in HBI's 1999 Preservation Revolving Fund Casebook. (Today the façade is covered with protective scaffolding.)

## Boston and New England Edition of *The Spiritual Traveler* Published

Historic Boston is proud to be associated with the publishing of the Boston and New England edition of *The Spiritual Traveler*. Written by Jana Riess and published by HiddenSpring, the book bills itself as "a guide to sacred sites and peaceful places." Along with furnishing brief descriptions and histories of important sacred sites of all types, *The Spiritual Traveler* includes concise and helpful introductory chapters on the various faith groups in New England and on the architecture of their worship spaces. Not just for tourists, this work is valuable to anyone wishing to explore the rich diversity of religious faiths and sacred architecture that Boston and New England are so fortunate to possess. **386 pages, \$22. Available at bookstores. ●**



# Roslindale Substation Feasibility Study Completed

The Roslindale Substation, an imposing brick building that anchors a prominent corner of Roslindale Square, was constructed in 1911 as part of the Boston Elevated Railway Company’s power supply system. Built using the highest technology of its time to power local trolley cars, the building outlived its original use and has been vacant since the 1970s. The structure remains in good repair, however, and the corner it inhabits is both well trafficked and highly visible.

In partnership with Roslindale Village Main Street, an organization that seeks to encourage investment in Roslindale Square, Historic Boston recently completed a feasibility study seeking to encourage redevelopment of this historic structure. We believe that the revitalization of this centrally located building has the potential to reinforce the economic and social health of Roslindale Square.

Using input gathered at a community meeting in Roslindale in July, Amory Architects analyzed four possible uses for the substation. Translated into economic terms, each scenario suffers from a **gap** between what it would cost and what conventional financing would support.



The disused Roslindale Substation today (top), and infused with new life in a rendering by Amory Architects (bottom).

Both images: Amory Architects

2 floors of restaurant and 2 floors of office	\$1.4 million gap
4 floors of office	\$1.6 million gap
1 floor arts/entertainment, 2 floors offices	\$1.8 million gap
1 floor offices, 1 floor restaurant, 2 floors residential	\$2.0 million gap

**But given the current public ownership of the space and the potential community benefits to its redevelopment, the study suggests the gap be viewed as a challenge, rather than as a deterrent.**

The Historic Boston/Roslindale Village Main Street Study offers some tactics to bridge the gap. These include transferring ownership to a non-profit organization or a municipal entity to take advantage of grants from the Massachusetts Historical Commission’s Preservation Projects Fund, and structuring a deal that would allow capital costs to be eligible for the Federal Historic Preservation Investment Tax Credits.

Next steps? Here are two we recommend:

- Roslindale Village Main Street should form a subcommittee to act as proponent for the project. It would identify strategies for going forward, and additional potential sources of money.
- The MBTA should complete its internal disposition process, allowing redevelopment proponents to pursue funding and come up with a viable reuse proposition. ●

## Steeple at a Glance

In 2003, we will celebrate the 10th anniversary of Historic Boston's Steeples Project, which provides funding and technical assistance for historic religious properties in Boston. The project has allowed numerous neighborhoods to safeguard and improve their sacred structures, ensuring that these important buildings will last for generations to come. Often, a welcome side effect of a Steeples grant is a renewed community-wide commitment to inner-city neighborhood revitalization.

How does it work? Historic Boston raises funds from charitable foundations and corporations, and re-grants this money in the form of competitive matching awards to historic religious property owners. The properties that receive grants are architecturally and historically significant, usually distinguished by steeples, towers, or domes that are visual landmarks. In most cases, these structures also provide human services that improve the quality of life in Boston neighborhoods. Many such buildings verge on becoming endangered due to deferred maintenance and financial constraints, which are often the result of demographic changes over several decades.

### Some key facts:

Historic Boston has

- awarded more than \$1 million to 44 houses of worship,
- disbursed \$576,586 for major repairs to building envelopes,
- disbursed \$148,208 for technical assistance, and
- disbursed \$68,659 for illumination.

In addition:

- Steeples grants have leveraged more than \$9 million more in additional investments.
- 16 Boston neighborhoods have benefited from Steeples grants.
- 17 denominations have received Steeples grants.
- 14 foundations have granted \$1.2 million to Historic Boston for the Steeples Project.



Above: Numbers 5, 6, 7, & 8 Alvah Kittredge Park, Highland Park, Roxbury, today



Left: Numbers 7 & 8 before and after

## A Glass Half-Full: The Alvah Kittredge Park Row Houses

Using monies from the Massachusetts Historical Commission, the George B. Henderson Foundation, and the Boston Redevelopment Authority, Historic Boston has restored the exteriors of numbers 7 & 8 Alvah Kittredge Park. The Boston Redevelopment Authority, which owns these two properties, licensed Historic Boston to undertake this work during 2002 and 2001.

The rehabilitation work ranges from the mundane — pouring basement slabs and patching damaged brownstone — to the sublime — installing hand-cut fishscale slates on the front mansards, reproducing ornamental copper parapet caps, and restoring two-over-two windows and double front doors consistent with early photographs.

And their neighbors pictured on the left? Number 5 has had the same owner since 1945; Number 6, since 1978. In December 2000, the City of Boston's Inspectional Services Department brought a receivership action against them to correct the unsafe condition of

their buildings. As of this writing, no substantive repairs have started. The Veteran's Benefit Clearinghouse Community Development Corporation, however, has actively been seeking funds to rehabilitate these buildings for their owners.

Listed in HBI's 1999 Casebook, Historic Boston completed a feasibility study on these four properties in the spring of 2000. The thrust of the study was that even if they were transferred to single ownership, in current market conditions it would still require about \$1.2 million in subsidy to preserve these historic buildings and restore urgently needed housing to this neighborhood. Costs are only higher with multiple ownership. So far, Historic Boston has invested more than \$450,000 in the work pictured above.

Is the Alvah-Kittredge glass half full, or half empty? The jury is still out. ●



Stanley M. Smith  
Photo by Christopher Fitzgerald

## Letter from the Executive Director

Preservation is about retaining memories. It protects and conserves the buildings that define places and life events.

What is Historic Boston's approach to preservation? We are exploring new ways to articulate how we put people and resources together to preserve Boston's architectural heritage.

Our work falls into three main categories: ❶ planning and outreach, ❷ catalyzing and supporting projects, and ❸ acquisition and development.

Planning and outreach typically involve the preparation of revolving fund casebooks in consultation with many people and organizations. The casebooks identify pivotal historic sites, explain what makes them important, and tell why they are in danger. Casebook properties give focus to the efforts of preservationists, community groups, and (hopefully) developers. If casebooks stimulate sensitive redevelopment by others, their success narrows the areas to which Historic Boston needs to apply its limited human and fiscal resources.

Over the past 20 years, Historic Boston has prepared four casebooks. The 1991 Religious Property Casebook gave birth to the Steeple Project (*see page 3*). This past summer, graduate intern Eric Martin (from the University of Vermont Preservation Program) updated the 1999 Casebook on the web. (*See [www.historicboston.org](http://www.historicboston.org) for the updates and original entries.*)

Catalyzing and supporting projects involves property owners and others who share our vision of a site's importance: the Boston Landmarks Commission, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, community groups, and consultants who apply focused expertise. Typically, Historic Boston's involvement commences with the preparation of a feasibility study, as is the case with the Roslindale Substation, or else with the preparation of a comprehensive building assessment which our Steeple Project helps fund for religious property owners.

What do these studies do? They identify the elements of a property that merit preservation, detail the ways in which a rehabilitated building can better serve its owner and the community, quantify costs, predict value-created, and suggest strategies to obtain subsidies and structure deals. These kinds of initiatives may call upon Historic Boston to raise money, dedicate staff resources to an issue, make grants and loans, seek to build capacity in other organizations, or complement the planning and regulatory powers of the Boston Landmarks Commission through entrepreneurial initiatives.

Acquisition, development, and ownership are strategies of last resort for a preservation revolving fund like ours. Historic Boston pursues this route in unique situations, such as the Old Corner Bookstore and the Hayden Building. They are sources of continuing income, and their success inspires confidence in Historic Boston's staff capabilities. However, Historic Boston's resources are better

leveraged when we catalyze investment in important buildings with shorter-term ownership, as we have for more than a half dozen other properties.

Thankfully, the challenges we face in Boston today are different than those faced in some cities today, where current leadership believes clearing whole neighborhoods of old buildings will lead to progress, as Boston believed when it demolished the West End in the 1960s. Boston is blessed with a mayor who is a proactive supporter of preservation. With a shortage rather than a surplus of housing in Boston helping to encourage the restoration and re-use of older buildings, we can target our efforts on specific problem solving, rather than needing to change the face of municipal government.

However, there is no room for complacency. Support for historic preservation in Boston may be broad, but experience suggests that it is also shallow. If we are to sustain the health of preservation in Boston over the long-term, many groups—the Boston Landmarks Commission, the Massachusetts Historical Commission, Historic Massachusetts, the Boston Preservation Alliance, the National Trust, and Historic Boston—must all work closely together. Each organization needs strong, committed leadership also willing to collaborate effectively with each other. We must work collectively to expand and strengthen the constituency for historic preservation. We must re-tell true and compelling stories to assure the continued existence of meaningful financial incentives for preservation. Both the Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund and the Federal Historic Preservation Investment Tax Credit give preservation a competitive edge over shortsighted solutions that threaten a city's architectural and cultural heritage. We must use this advantage so that Boston will continue to be Boston. ●

## About Historic Boston...

Historic Boston Incorporated is a private, non-profit organization that puts people and resources together to preserve endangered historic sites in the city of Boston. It gives priority to projects which will leverage additional public and private commitments, embody thoughtful restoration standards, catalyze neighborhood renewal, and protect cultural resources.

To accomplish these objectives, Historic Boston engages in a variety of entrepreneurial activities which include buying property, making grants, providing technical assistance, lending money, building the capacity of other organizations with similar goals, and seeking new funds. Over the past 15 years, Historic Boston's revolving fund has invested \$4.6 million for 14 preservation projects, which has leveraged more than \$25 million of additional investments in Boston neighborhoods.

Historic Boston provides leadership, leverage, and focus for people and organizations throughout the region who share the ideals and objectives of safeguarding America's heritage.

*HBI is a charitable, non-profit organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and a private operating foundation under code Section 4942(j)(3). Tax-deductible gifts or bequests may be sent to Historic Boston Incorporated at 3 School Street, Boston MA 02108.*

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