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Boston Modern: Spirit of Reinvention

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Boston Modern

THE SPIRIT
OF REINVENTION





Boston Modern: The Spirit of Reinvention events and booklet are part of the Modern Module program, a two-year endeavor in four cities, aimed at building public support for and engaging in discussions focused on the study and protection of America's modern architectural resources. The series of events is coordinated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Modernism + Recent Past Program and funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Henry Luce Foundation.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation's Northeast Office is proud to host Boston Modern in close partnership with the Boston Preservation Alliance, Boston Landmarks Commission, Boston Society of Architects, Common Boston, DOCOMOMO-US/New England, Historic New England, and Preservation Massachusetts, with additional support provided by Ann and Graham Gund as well as Sidney Bowen and Angela Watson.

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JUNE 2010

Modernism + Recent Past Program

Significant sites come in all shapes and sizes, and from all eras of American history. The architectural, historical, and cultural sites of the Modern movement and dating from the recent past are an important chapter in our national story, yet many of these important resources are demolished every day with no consideration of their significance. Scores of other structures and landscapes are threatened by a lack of public awareness and public policies that fail to provide adequate protections.

Since 1965, the National Trust for Historic Preservation has helped promote, protect, and preserve Modern and recent past sites along America's roadsides, in its metropolitan centers and suburbs, on its public lands, and fronting Main Street. At a time when development pressures, the vagaries of the economy, and aging infrastructure put more Modern and recent past resources at risk, the National Trust recommits itself to raising public awareness, improving public policy, and supporting grassroots advocacy in this important area of preservation with its Modernism + Recent Past Program, also known as TrustModern.

Headquartered at the Western Office of the National Trust in San Francisco, TrustModern seeks to reacquaint Americans with their living history by reframing public perceptions about American Modern and recent past resources; creating stronger federal, state and local policies to protect our modern architectural heritage; and fostering an action network of individuals and organizations interested in modern and recent past resource preservation and rehabilitation. The National Trust moves forward on these issues with the firm conviction that these places matter and that if we do not preserve the significant buildings, landscapes, and sites of the 20th century, our nation stands to lose a vital aspect of its architectural and cultural heritage.

ON THE COVER Federal Reserve Bank Building (at center), Boston; Hugh Stubbins & Associates, Inc., 1977.

FACING PAGE Josiah Quincy Elementary School and Community Center, Boston; The Architects Collaborative, 1976.



Boston's Modern Legacy

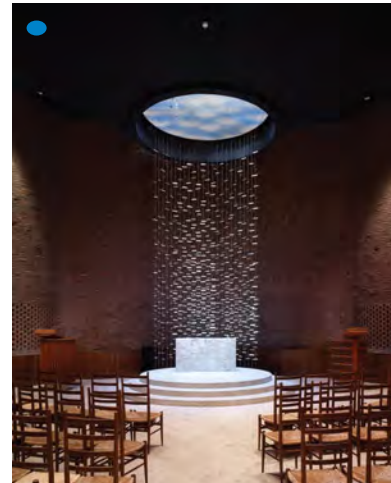
The Boston area may be best known for its dignified brick buildings and clapboard houses from the 18th and 19th centuries, but it is also host to a number of pioneering examples of Modern architecture and urban design. The public embraced these new building forms, ones that recognized the changing character of our modern world.




Boston's notable history of progressivism provided fertile ground for architectural experimentation. By the early 1930s, forward-looking families built cubic International Style houses in the suburbs and institutions erected streamlined Moderne buildings in Cambridge and Boston. Traditional methods using brick and stone masonry were readily combined with the use of steel, concrete, aluminum, and glass as the city—and the nation—sought to reinvent itself.

The Boston economy surged ahead in the 1960s and 1970s; monumentally scaled civic plazas and spatially complex buildings replaced intimate urban neighborhoods and old industrial areas. Muscular architectural forms celebrated the revitalization of the city while recalling the massive granite blocks and heavy wood beams of Boston's earlier buildings. Context, function, materials, and cultural aspirations found expression in structures of unrivaled sculptural ingenuity.

By the late 1970s, societal tastes and technology—along with the economy—began to change. Once again, the resolute determination of a community striving to be “modern” led to the adoption of new methods of construction, planning principles, and architectural form. Every generation makes its own contribution to the evolving urban mosaic, recording its values, experience, and vision of the future in the work it leaves behind.

Boston area universities were early adopters of Modern design in the 1930s. With that foundation laid, visionary school leaders again sought out world-renowned architects during a period of expansion after World War II. Innovative and bold architectural forms expressed these institutions' ambition, progressive social vision, and spirit of experimentation. The best of these structures inventively fit contemporary institutions into the fine grain of the city's historic fabric and the greater New England landscape. The Boston brick building tradition informed both Eero Saarinen's 1955 Massachusetts Institute of Technology chapel and the Paul Rudolph-designed 1958 Jewett Art Center at Wellesley College. These buildings symbolize the dynamism of this era of design, by incorporating playful curves, angles, and assemblages of elements not found in the work of the forefathers. Saarinen's graceful 1955 Kresge Auditorium goes a step further, showcasing the ability of materials like concrete and glass to create new forms and volumes.



-  Kresge Auditorium, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge; Eero Saarinen, 1955.
-  Chapel, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge; Eero Saarinen, 1955.
-  Jewett Art Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley; Paul Rudolph, 1958.





Paris-based design pioneer Le Corbusier revealed the sculptural potential of cast-in-place concrete at the 1963 Carpenter Center at Harvard University. The serpentine ramp and curvilinear forms allow the art center's spaces to reach out and embrace the surrounding campus. A rooftop garden, primary-colored accents and large expanses of glass contrast with the dramatic concrete profiles, reminiscent of a Picasso portrait abstraction. Le Corbusier's use of *béton brut* construction—French for raw concrete and often termed brutalist—offered a modern sense of material authenticity and a hand-wrought connection to the craftsmen that built it.

Jose Luis Sert, a protégé of Le Corbusier, became an influential force in Boston after being appointed head of Harvard's architecture department in 1953. Raised in Spain, he brought a Mediterranean social and architectural sensibility to what were still seen as



● The Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge; Le Corbusier, 1963.
● Chapel, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge; Eero Saarinen, 1955.

old-fashioned academic institutions. His design for Boston University Law School is a contemporary reinterpretation of the traditional masonry prevalent throughout much of the campus. In place of stone blocks and carved ornamentation, Sert offered interlocking slabs of concrete to articulate the building sections. At the Harvard Science Center, Sert expanded his design vocabulary to include a spiderlike assembly of canted steel beams as roof supports, an interior system of suspended trays for replaceable pipes and wires, and a hemispherical observatory above to complement the structure's cubic forms. This celebration of modern technology and techniques was pushed even further at Perry Dean Rogers' Wellesley Science Center, where brightly colored pipes and ducts animated a tinker toy assembly of concrete columns and beams wrapped in glass. Solid concrete forms eventually yielded entirely to glass cladding over hidden steel frames that disguised, rather than articulated, a building's underlying structure.



- Wellesley College Science Center, Wellesley; Perry, Dean, Rogers Partners, 1977.
- Graduate School of Design (Gund Hall), Harvard University, Cambridge; John Andrews, 1972.
- Boston Architectural Center, Boston; Ashley, Myer & Associates, 1966.
- Harvard Science Center, Harvard University, Cambridge; Sert, Jackson & Associates, 1973.





 GOVERNMENT / CIVIC / SPIRITUAL

Large scale redevelopment within the city created opportunities for cultural and civic organizations to reinvent and re-establish themselves in the mid twentieth century. The centrally located Scollay Square, a rabbit's warren of streets and older buildings, gave way to the epic forms of Government Center. Monumental buildings and open plazas marked the newly configured site, designed to manifest public confidence in the future of Boston.

Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles' design for Boston City Hall, completed in 1968, established a classical order for the modern age. Rising up from the red brick base is a concrete colonnade and exuberant sculptural projections that enclose the city council chambers, the mayor's offices, and the many civil service agencies that help run the city.

Paul Rudolph, one of the most ingenious American architects, designed the Government Service Center a block away from City Hall, marked by a symphony of swirling walls and



● Government Service Center, Boston; Paul Rudolph, 1971.

● Boston City Hall, Boston; Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles, 1968.

FOLLOWING PAGES Christian Science Plaza, Boston; I.M. Pei & Partners and Araldo Cossutta, Associated Architects, 1972.

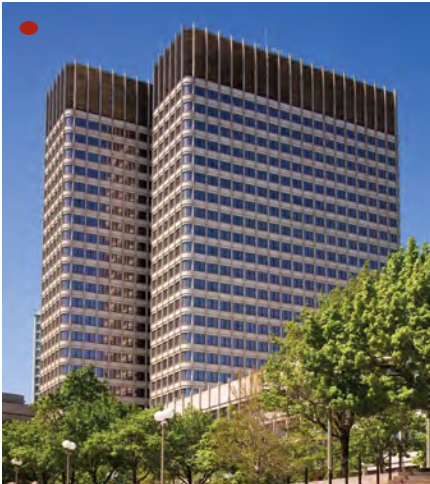






stairways in rough hewn concrete, metal, and glass. His innovative designs also revived the First Church in Boston (founded in 1630), after a devastating fire. The interlocked composition includes the old stone and charred wood to masterfully evoke the passage of time within a modern vocabulary, while the steel and concrete structure create a stunning interior space that bathes worshipers with light flooding in from above.

The renewal of the Back Bay rail yards and industrial areas continued on through the 1970s. I.M. Pei and Partners designed a number of buildings for the Christian Science Center as part of an expansion effort for the U.S. headquarters of the Church of Christ, Scientist. The modern buildings surround a central reflecting pool, with abstract concrete facades facing the Mother Church of 1894, notable for its massive dome and classically-inspired fenestration.



- The First Church in Boston, Boston; Paul Rudolph, 1972.
- John F. Kennedy Federal Office Building, Boston; The Architects Collaborative, 1966.
- John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston; I.M. Pei & Partners, 1979.

Modernist corporate architecture made an early appearance in the area with the opening of the Polaroid Building on the Charles River in Cambridge (originally B.B. Chemical) in 1937. Within twenty years, a majority of businesses adopted modern design for their namesake structures. Rising in regional prominence, Boston-based corporations commissioned buildings with a strong sculptural presence to distinguish themselves from the collection of glass boxes being erected in New York City.

The façade of Paul Rudolph's Blue Cross Blue Shield building of 1960 is defined by a series of deep precast concrete fins that incorporate the building's ventilation system and give depth and visual interest to the walls. F.A. Stahl's State Street Bank used deeply recessed windows to give the building a sense of substance—not unlike the masonry buildings that surround both of these structures.



 **Blue Cross/Blue Shield Building, Boston; Paul Rudolph, 1960.**

 **B.B. Chemical Company/Polaroid Building, Cambridge; Coolidge Shepley Bulfinch and Abbot, 1938.**

 **State Street Bank, Boston; F.A. Stahl & Associates, 1966.**





Ground floor retail spaces were an essential component of most commercial construction at the time, reinforcing the vitality of the urban streets. Five Cents Saving Bank's four-story colonnade, designed by Kallman and McKinnell, curves elegantly around its downtown Boston corner to welcome customers in from the street. Sert's Holyoke Center runs a two story retail arcade beneath ten floors of Harvard offices; the composition of its hovering floor slabs, projecting windows frames, and light metal sunscreens are altered to express the functions happening within. And Ben Thompson's Design Research Building in Harvard Square wraps cantilevered floors in butt-jointed glass to display Modernist merchandise to those passing by. Built from concrete in the 1960s, all these buildings are strongly articulated and incorporate broad overhangs to create protective pedestrian environments.



- Holyoke Center, Harvard University, Cambridge; Sert, Jackson & Associates, 1965.
- Design Research Headquarters, Cambridge; Benjamin Thompson & Associates, 1969.
- John Hancock Tower, Boston; Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, 1976.
- Boston Five Cents Savings Bank, Boston; Kallmann McKinnell & Wood, 1973.





SUBURBAN HOUSES / URBAN HOUSING

Individual houses were opportunities for architects to experiment with abstract forms and new technologies in the relative privacy of suburban retreats. Walter Gropius, a German expatriate who came to Harvard to head the Graduate School of Design, built his house in Lincoln in 1938. Although it was not the earliest Modern house in the Boston area, it was the first to attract widespread attention. Its use of industrial materials, open interiors, and generous connections to the meadows around it made it a showplace for cutting-edge design. A generation later his protégés at The Architects Collaborative built their own experimental houses at Six Moon Hill and Five Fields in Lexington. Grouped together on a country road, the structures housed a community of like-minded families.

If private houses were architects' personal design laboratories, student housing from the 1940s through the 1960s offered them a chance to create models for a more inclusive kind of community. Finnish architect Alvar Aalto's brick-clad Baker House at the Massachusetts



● Gropius House, Lincoln; Walter Gropius, 1938.

● Six Moon Hill Community, Lexington; The Architects Collaborative, 1948-1950.



Institute of Technology weaves a series of shared spaces into a wave-shaped wall of dorm rooms looking out over the Charles River. Gropius's Graduate Student Center at Harvard composes four story blocks of apartments around an open courtyard that faces communal living and dining areas. And Sert's Peabody Terrace at Harvard arranges concrete towers around courtyards that are like outdoor rooms for residents and the neighborhood. The buildings' jagged silhouettes are bristling with balconies and sunscreens like those that animate the Spanish hill towns Sert knew in his youth.

The 1971 Harbor Towers, designed by I.M. Pei, provided high end waterfront housing that embodies more subtle sculptural components. Twin high rises are wrapped with deep set windows and curving balconies that elegantly pinwheel around them. With an economy of means, Pei turns these slim concrete towers into emblems of sophisticated urban living.



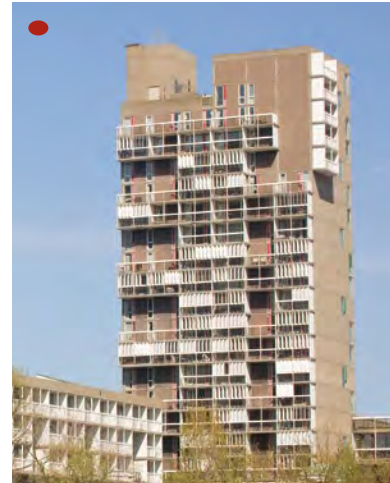
- 330 Beacon Street Apartments, Boston; Hugh Stubbins and Associates, 1959.
- Harbor Towers, Boston; I.M. Pei & Partners, 1971.
- Graduate Center/Harkness Commons, Harvard University, Cambridge; Walter Gropius, 1950.

Afterword

Each of the buildings and landscapes represented in this booklet is a powerful expression of the era's desire to provide a new vision for our cities and civic institutions, and talented architects' willingness to experiment with modern forms and materials. The sense of optimism propelling the design and construction may seem naïve today, but it was an essential part of an overall effort to remake cities in the mid-twentieth century.

Boston Modern is intended to remind the reader of the spirit that inspired these works of architecture and urban design, and to suggest that their dramatic spaces and sculptural exuberance can still offer visual delight and rich experiences. Like the architecture of most periods, the work of the 1950s through the 1970s will go in and out of fashion as cities and society continue to evolve. But the best of this work is as worthy of appreciation—and preservation—as that of any other period in history.


DAVID EISEN



● Baker House, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge; Alvar Aalto, 1948.

● Peabody Terrace, Harvard University, Cambridge; Sert Jackson & Gourley, 1964.

FACING PAGE Government Service Center, Boston; Paul Rudolph, 1963-1970.



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