

Robert Campbell: Rethinking Boston

As an architect and the architecture critic of the Boston Globe, this Pulitzer winner believes in 'the art of making a good city, or a good living, or a good garden.'

Boston is a city that's had to reinvent itself and its economy a number of times. In a quite literal way, Boston is an invented city. The land on which it stands, especially the older neighborhoods, was largely created by human initiative. It is filled land, the fill having been created by cutting down hills, dredging earth from the bottom of the Charles River Basin, gouging it out from subways, or shipping it in from the suburbs. That process continues. Spectacle Island, one of 30 islands that dot the outer harbor, was recently greatly enlarged by fill from the excavation known as the Big Dig.

The first Boston was a port. The famous speedy clipper ships and others plied the world's sea routes, creating, through what was called the China Trade, much of the wealth of Boston's older families. There's wonderful Museum of the China Trade in Salem, part of the fine Peabody Essex Museum. Eventually, though, shipping moved on to deeper harbors.

The next Boston was a manufacturing and distribution center—furniture, textiles, shoes, and much else. One neighborhood downtown is still known as the Leather District, though today it's mostly the world headquarters of the Gillette Corporation on the Fort Point Channel, was recently acquired by Procter and Gamble. Most of the factories long ago moved elsewhere, mostly south, for bigger floor areas and cheaper labor.

Boston went through a long depression, which lasted from the 1920s through about 1960. The city then underwent another rebirth. An economy some began calling "hi-tech", a computer-based economy, spun out of the laboratories of MIT into the corporations that sprang up along Route 128, the circle route around the city. Federal urban renewal funds poured into the city at a time when the President and Speaker of the House were both Bostonians and the Senator was the President's brother. Much was demolished (too much, most would say) and much was built. Boston was again learning to reinvent itself.

Today the bulwarks of the city, its economy, and its life are at least fourfold: education, medicine, biotech, and culture. In education, Boston and its immediate environs can boast Harvard, MIT, Brandeis, Tufts, Wellesley, Boston College, Boston University, and Northeastern, as well as dozens of smaller, more specialized schools, many of which possess national reputations and include Berklee College of Music, Mass College of Art, New England Conservatory, and Emerson College. Most of the colleges and universities are either expanding or else have announced plans to expand, including Harvard's intention of nearly doubling its land area by growing across the river into the Boston neighborhood of Allston. Of new campus architecture, the wonderful student center at Wellesley, by Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam, is the building most worth a visit.

Medicine clusters around what's known locally as the Longwood area, a location pioneered by Harvard Medical School back in 1906. Longwood is probably the city's fastest-growing neighborhood. New hospital and medical research facilities crowd into it, all wishing to be together in the same place so they can interact with one another in teaching, medical research, and medical practice.

Biotech is the latest economy spun off from MIT, which seems to invent a new economy every generation or so. Something like 70

BOSTON FREEDOM TRAIL

Location
Boston, MA

Client
Mayor's Office, City of Boston;
Boston Redevelopment Authority

Design
Roll, Barresi & Associates

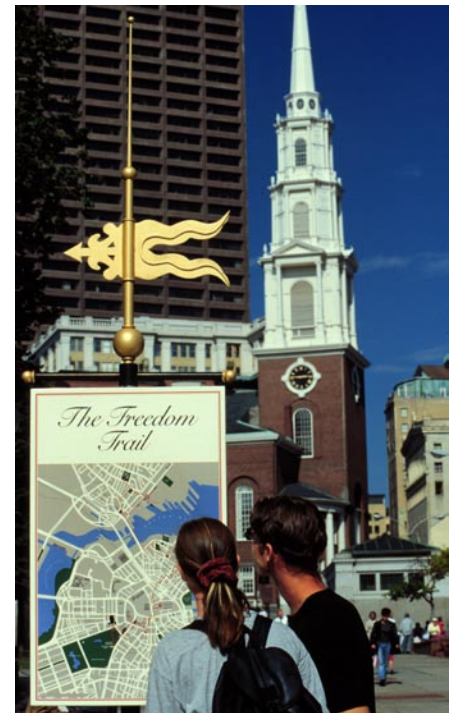
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Fireform, Design Communications
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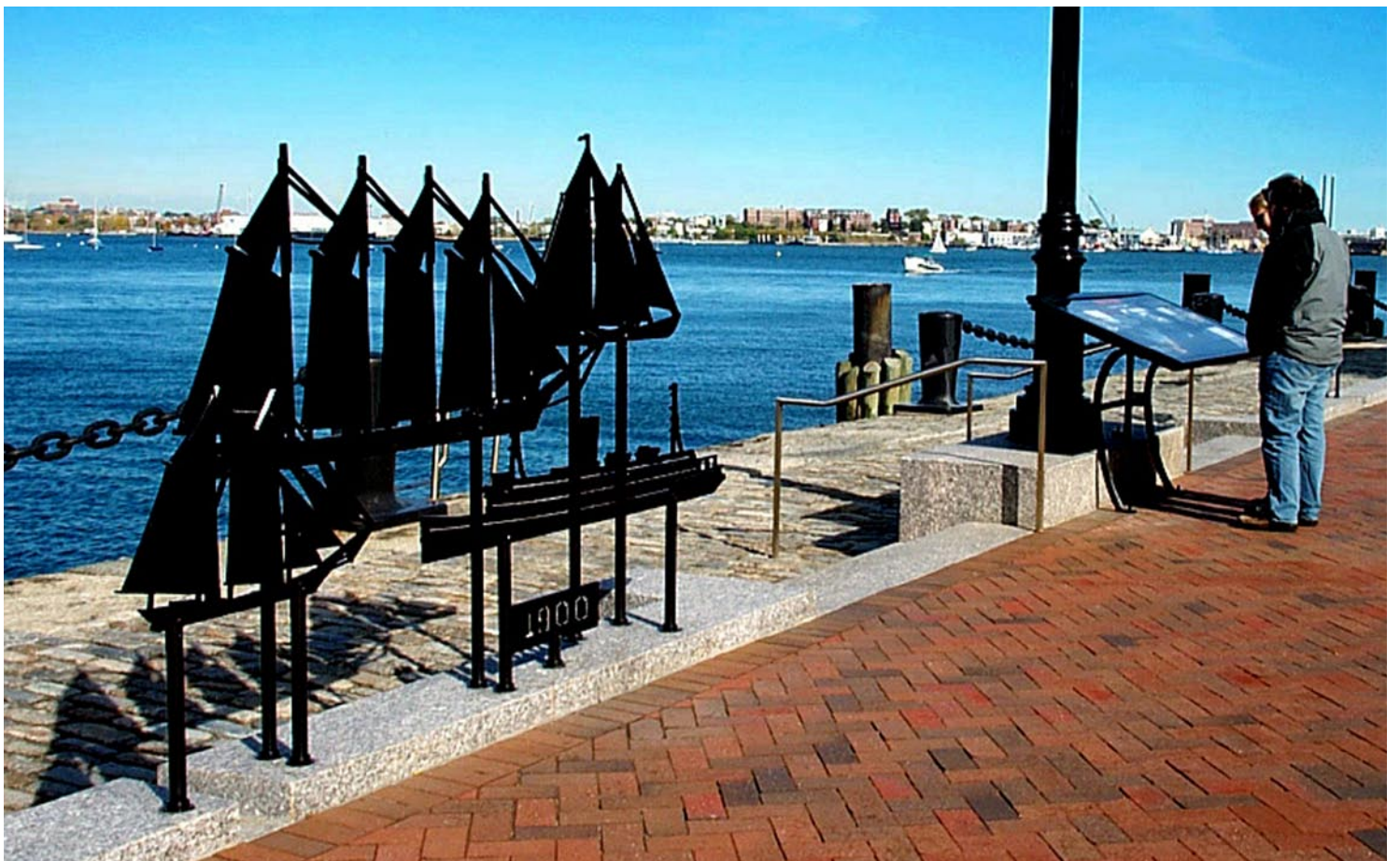
Photos
Greg Premru

Opposite: The original painted trail has been replaced with permanent pavers of Boston brick framed by Woodbury granite, establishing the route permanently and directly into the fabric of the streetscape.

Right Above: The Freedom Trail sign program links 16 historic sites along the trail in Boston and Charlestown. The program included directional signs and these map kiosks, which orient visitors not only to the Freedom Trail sites but also to other historic destinations in the city. Map kiosks include a contemporary orientation map of Boston and a historic map (c. 1776) on the reverse side, with interpretive graphics and information. Signs were fabricated with wrought iron and porcelain enamel.

Right Below: Cast bronze Freedom Trail medallions are set in granite along the trail and serve as markers for each historic site. A prominent feature of the Boston skyline at the time of the Revolution, weathervanes atop steeples, is the inspiration for the design of the Freedom Trail identity.





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private bio or bio-related companies now belly up to the great university in East Cambridge. I’m using the term “biotech” for a lot of scientific stuff such as nanotechnology, also spinning out of MIT, and stem cell research, for which Harvard is building a new half-million-square-foot lab in Allston. MIT is also the area’s most adventurous client for architecture, having built two huge, astonishing, and highly controversial buildings in recent years, the Stata Center by Angelino Frank Gehry and Simmons dorm by New Yorker Steven Holl.

By culture I mean all the great institutions: the Boston Symphony Orchestra, now invigorated by a great new conductor, James Levine; the Museum of Fine Arts, now embarked on an expansion by British architect Norman Foster; the Harvard art museums, also planning growth both in Cambridge and Allston; the unique Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, which I tell everyone is the first place to visit in Boston if you visit no other, and which plans an addition by Italian architect Renzo Piano; the Peabody Essex in Salem, recently enlarged by Moshe Safdie; the Red Sox, in legendary Fenway Park; and the current hot ticket, the Institute of Contemporary Art, freshly housed in its spectacular new building overlooking Boston Harbor, which opened in December with a daring and dramatic design by New Yorkers Diller Scofidio+Renfro. And many, many others.

It’s clear from all this growth that most of our institutions—cultural, educational, medical, biotech—are engaged in a period of rethinking and re-envisioning. And I haven’t even mentioned the biggest rethink of all, which is the famous (or infamous?) Big Dig project. An overhead expressway, which (as in many other cities)

MOAKLEY US COURTHOUSE AND HARBOR PARK

Location
South Boston, MA

Client
General Services Administration

Design
Roll, Barresi & Associates

Fabrication
Wilson/Fireform, Design Communications, Skylight Studios

Consultants
Carol R. Johnson Associates (landscape architects), Pel Cobb Freed & Partners (architects), Lou Sedaris (writing)

Photos
Roll, Barresi & Associates

Opposite Top: The Moakley US Courthouse on Fan Pier is located in the Seaport District on the South Boston waterfront, which has seen tremendous change over the past ten years, and includes a harbor park with landscaping designed by Carol R. Johnson Associates consisting entirely of native plantings. Fan Pier is also along the Boston HarborWalk, which is a continuous public walkway along the waters edge.

Opposite Bottom: Developments along Boston’s waterfront and HarborWalk include graphics and signage elements that interpret the history of the site. The Harbor Park at Moakley US Courthouse includes cut steel ship silhouettes and displays that interpret the history of commerce and shipping through the Boston harbor. Ship silhouettes were water jet cut from steel plate. Interpretive displays supports are cast iron in keeping with the light fixtures and landscape furnishings.

Below: Detail of interpretive HarborWalk display. Graphics, reminiscent of turn-of-the-century typography, provide a timeline of development along the harbor and quantify the changing character of trade and commerce from the 19th Century to the present day. All interpretive displays are fabricated in porcelain enamel.

FAN PIER.

THE EXPANSION OF BOSTON'S COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

After the end of the Revolution in 1783, Boston merchants built huge fortunes through foreign trade. Commerce further expanded after 1850 with the birth of railroads and the boom of industry. Immigrants swelled Boston's population and worked the docks, rail yards, and factories. Leather and wool from around the world supplied shoe works and mills. Development of the port's sailship connections brought a great increase in foreign commerce.

1800 Maritime Trade
Boston, 1795
Boston's central harbor is sheltered from wind and waves. Ship masts for China, the West Indies, Europe, and the Caribbean.

1830's For Trade
A global network of steel and copper. Donald McKay developed and refined his iron-clad ship to create the fastest commercial sailing ship to Boston. It was the most famous of the Boston Admirals.

1840 Transatlantic Passenger Service
Clipper Ship, The Lightning, 1850
Over a decade creating, fully laden. The Lightning averaged 22 knots per sea mile per day. This record speed earned its captain a place in the American Club race.

1870 Boston Wharf Company
South Boston Land Fill, 1870
At Boston's port activities prospered the original development. The Boston Wharf Company was founded in 1870, with its primary activities. Land was gradually filled in, and wharves and warehouses were built.

1870 Boston Wharf Company
The Great Fire of 1872
After years of active commerce, the Great Fire destroyed the New England wharf of Boston's harbor. It was 13 acres of rubble. A fire of the kind known as the Fan Pier fire, which had been used for the harbor, had been used for the harbor.

1890 New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad
South Boston Flats, 1887
New industries attracted direct investment from the railroads. In South Boston, new commerce grew from the old Boston waterfront. Fan Pier on the tip and the Terminal for the New York & New England Railroad in the background.

1900 Union Label
Four-Masted Schooner
The Fishing Trade
Boston's fishing industry was key to its economic growth. With all fish very valuable, the Boston fishing industry prospered. After 1900, a new method of packing fish with ice replaced dried fish. The Boston fishing fleet grew rapidly.

1,381,773 TONS Entered and Cleared Port of Boston, 1857

233,881 TONS Entered and Cleared Port of Boston, 1826

4,145,187 TONS Entered and Cleared Port of Boston, 1900

Two-masted Schooner
Clipper Ship

BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

Location

Waltham, MA

Client

Brandeis University

Design

Roll, Barresi & Associates

Fabrication

Design Communications Ltd.

Consultants

Halvorson Design Partnership
(landscape architects)

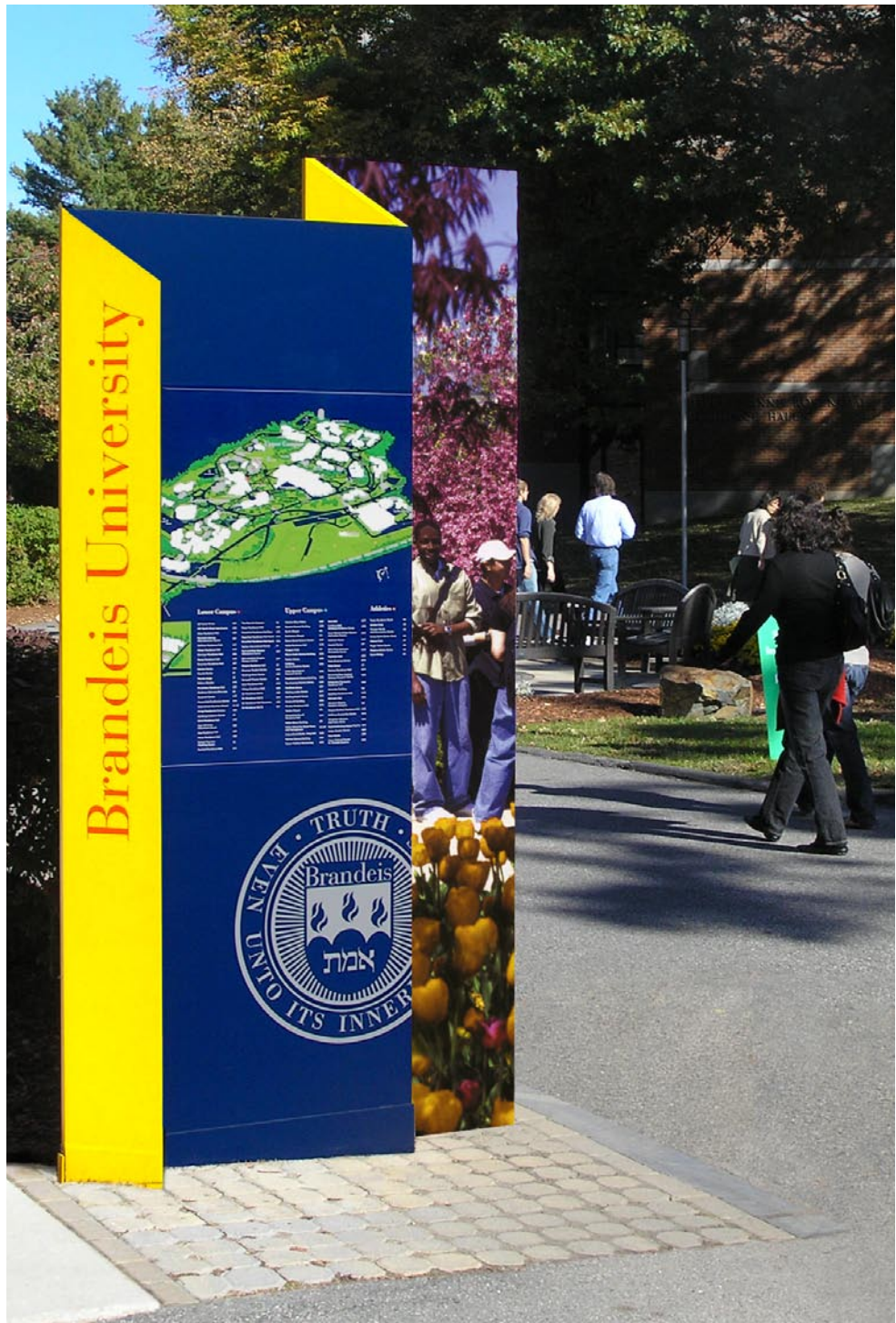
Photos

Roll, Barresi & Associates

Right: The Brandeis campus sign program encompasses vehicular and pedestrian wayfinding, including these campus directories located at key decision points throughout campus. Because visitors access information from different sources, the same map graphic is used on the directory, hand held visitor guide, and Brandeis website, providing consistent information that is reinforced at each point of contact.

Below: Signs combine information, color, form, and images of student life to communicate the active and dynamic character of the university.

Below Right: Brandeis University recently completed the implementation of a campus-wide sign program, which included this large-scale identification sign that emerges from the landscape at the approach to their Waltham campus. The folded form, a distinguishing characteristic of the signage, is fabricated with solid thick welded aluminum plate.





Above: Boston's Marine Industrial Park was developed on the site of an old military base and includes a diverse mix of tenants, including the Massport Cruise Terminal, the Boston Design Center, light manufacturing, and fishing and shipbuilding industries. In part, the intent of the signage and graphics program was to help provide a unifying element throughout the site.



Above: Bold typography, bright colors and high finishes distinguish these identification signs, as well as directional signs and map kiosks throughout the site.

walled off the downtown from the waterfront, has been demolished and replaced with a tunnel. Despite the widely publicized cost overruns and some worrisome maintenance issues, the Dig is a great boon for Boston. It reconnects the city with the ocean and frees up a generous swath of open space through the densest parts of the city. Much of this will be parkland, plus at least two museums now in the planning stages.

Boston has its problems, of course. A severe one is the fact that its economic success has made the city unaffordable for many people. Racial and economic barriers still exist. Schools are not what they should be or what they once were. Public infrastructure (bridges, tunnels, water mains, much else) are, as they are in many other cities, the victims of shamefully deferred maintenance. No

one knows the long-term effect of global warming, which may well flood our downtown by the end of the century.

But on balance, Boston today is the healthiest I've seen it. It can be, we hope, a model city for the coming decades. It will value the quality of community life over that of personal consumption. It will be a place in touch with its past but not afraid of change. The great early neighborhoods—not only famed ones like Beacon Hill, the Back Bay, and the South End, but many others—are now well protected by landmark laws and vigilant citizens. But as recent gems like the ICA and the Wellesley student center indicate, Boston can also fall in love with the new. It understands the double role of a great city. Like a great university, a city must hoard and treasure the wisdom and beauty of the past while, at the same time, moving forward to invent the future. ☐

Below: Taking advantage of a common element on the site, chain-link fencing, entrance and dry dock identification signs are constructed of 8' high white chain-link letters mounted on existing fencing.



MARINE INDUSTRIAL PARK

Location

South Boston, MA

Client

Economic Development and Industrial Corp./Boston, Boston, MA

Design

Roll, Barresi & Associates

Fabrication

Cornelius Architectural Products, Expert Fence Co.

Consultants

Carol R. Johnson Associates (landscape architects), Fay, Spofford and Thorndike (engineers)

Photos

Marvin Lewiton