

IN THE GUND STYLE

In 1979, when Graham Gund began adapting Boston's 1891 Charles C. Perkins Elementary School to condominiums, not the least astonishing aspect of the project was the creation of an indoor "garden" in a thirty-by-fifteen-foot stairwell. Abstract shapes in lime green, daffodil yellow, brown, pale blue, and tangerine suggested a tree, a sunset, a boulder, clouds, waves, and fruit: You could puzzle them out in much the way that you respond to a child's drawing. "The concept," explains Gund, the president of Graham Gund Architects in Cambridge, Massachusetts, "was to do something as new on the inside as the building was historic on the outside." But would anyone want to live in an old school building with an imaginary garden as an entrance lobby?

As it turns out, the garden has worn well over the last fifteen years, during which schoolhouse condominiums have themselves ceased to be an unusual idea; the residents maintain the garden in its original colors. Indeed, the building would seem to have had a particular attraction for some kinds of people. When

Gund was invited to a party to celebrate the condominium's tenth anniversary, he discovered that the owners tended to be designers or people with a design interest. "If you were getting everybody," muses Gund, a soft-spoken man in his fifties who seems to ward off a threatening world with gentle humor, "it wouldn't be worth doing." Perceiving a building in terms of the special experience it provides its residents has paid off handsomely.

Although Boston provides the context for the work of architect and preservationist Graham Gund, his buildings claim a singular appeal.

BY JANE BROWN
GILLETTE

remember," says Gund, "there was a prostitute—they used to line up on the corner in front of the school—and she told me during construction, 'If you keep this up I'm not going to have any place to stand.'" Alas for her, she was right. The street now houses professionals of a different stripe, and the most hallucinatory thing

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about it is the weird light reflected from the Hancock Tower in the distance.

In this mingled concern for adaptive use, design, the experiential aspects of architecture, and the urban context, the School-House Condominiums, for all their modesty, are in many ways a typical Graham Gund project. They demonstrate why Gund, a trustee of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is the perfect choice for local chairman of the Forty-eighth National Preservation Conference, which will be held in Boston October 26-30, 1994, and will take as its theme, "The Economics of Livable Communities: The Role of Historic Preservation."

Gund has been involved in preservation in Boston for some twenty-five years, and his complex vision is one in which preservation plays an ongoing role in the development of the city, going beyond the saving of individual buildings to inform new construction and create a civilized urban context. "There's something very nice about restoring a building," he says. "It makes you feel good. You're sort of knitting things back together. It's a way of making life whole."

It is always tempting to find in the lives of artists the metaphors that describe their work. In Gund's case, there is a great deal of romantic biographical material from which to choose. He grew up in an affluent Cleveland, Ohio, family, the fourth of six children born within seven years to an older, reputedly curmudgeonly, father and a mother who died when Gund was twelve. He remembers deciding to be an architect early on: It was a way to control life. It is a short jump from noting that desire

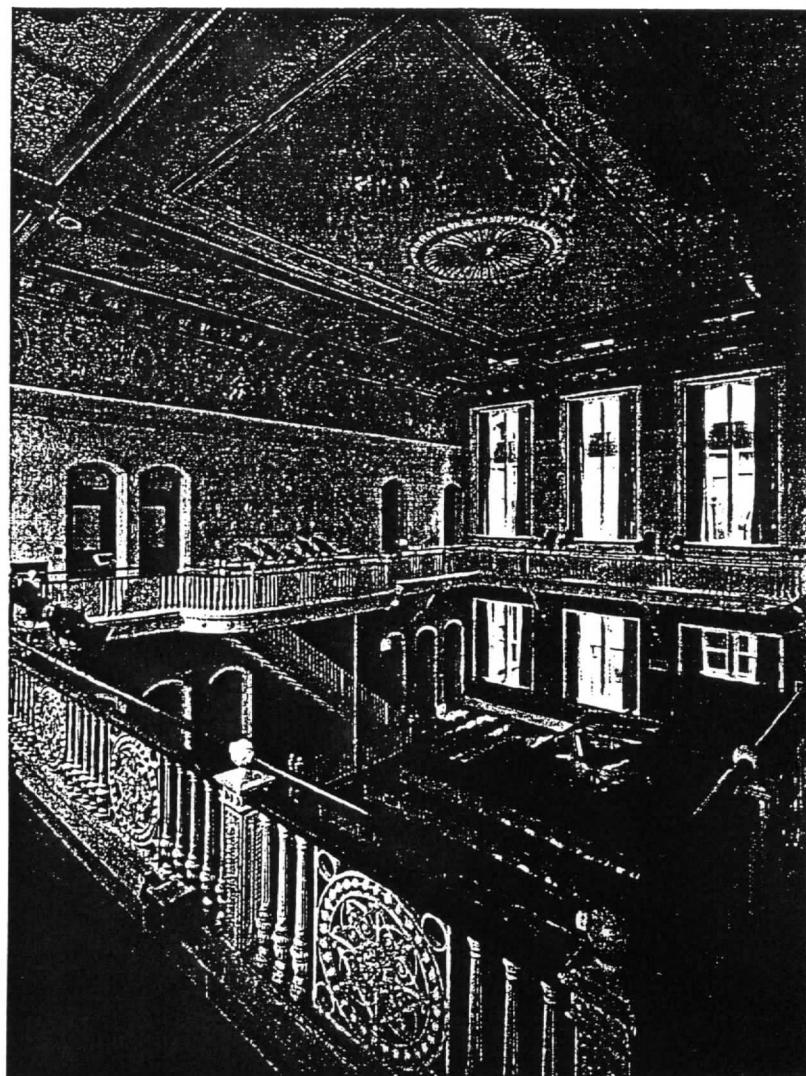
to the observation that Gund has left his mark on Boston: His buildings stand out. But they do not stand out in an unpleasant way. And, again, they are not unlike their maker, who came to Boston as a student and—the goal of many a midwestern scion—now fits seamlessly into a sophisticated but understated Cambridge way of life that prizes the mildly eccentric, the slightly rumpled, and the extremely talented. The organic city that Gund imagines as the ideal context of his work would seem to be, similarly, a creative, open, and expanding place rather than the Brahmin-ridden, hidebound Boston of tradition.

Very little of Gund's work falls into the category of pure restoration. ("I've always liked the idea of changing uses," he says.) Interestingly enough, however, both his home and his office come close. After studying psychology as an undergraduate at Kenyon College (a good preparation for ar-

chitecture, says Gund, because "it deals with perception, and it helps people relate to each other in groups"), he took art courses at the Rhode Island School of Design, then moved on to Harvard's Graduate School of Design, from which he received master's degrees in both architecture (1968) and urban design (1969). Although Harvard was still in the grip of Bauhaus theory, Gund was attracted to old buildings. (He did, however, work with Dean Walter Gropius as the youngest student member of a design team and its only non-German speaker; in meetings with the German client Gropius took the trouble to translate for Gund: "I was so impressed by that," Gund remembers.)

While still a student, Gund was involved in the restoration and adaptive use of Faneuil Hall and the Old City Hall—two of Boston's earliest ventures in the preservation of the urban environment. He also began some small renovation projects. Then he heard about an old house in Cambridge that was likely to be torn down because the lot was big enough for three houses. The 1856 Italianate house with its 1911 porch additions was in terrible shape—but even its decay spoke of a rich cultural history, and a peculiarly thrifty Bostonian one at that. The owner "had been born in the house, grew up in the house, had a family, and

In East Cambridge a former courtroom in the Old Superior Courthouse is now used as a flexible performing space by the Cambridge Multicultural Arts Center. During its years of vacancy the fittings had been stripped, but young craftspersons repaired and restored the plaster stenciling of the frieze, the cast-iron balcony railings, the carved woodwork, and the many colors of the central medallion and ceiling.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE ROSENTHAL



died in the house," recalls Gund. "Although she left a large inheritance, she'd go away in the winter and turn everything off, and the pipes would burst; the water kept running, even though it was cold, and there'd be four or five inches of water inside the house and water coming down the stairs. Then she'd come back and crank up the furnace. She did it for twenty years. When the grass would get really tall the fire department would come to cut it down because they considered it a fire hazard. I bought the house and fixed it up." He now lives there with his wife, Ann, who is active in Trinity Church and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and their son, Grady, aged four, who seems perfectly at ease in an environment filled with works of art that include a ten-foot Dubuffet, a maquette of the forty-foot *Trees*, which stands in front of the Chase Manhattan Bank in New York City.

In 1984 Gund moved his offices to Bulfinch Square in East Cambridge, a restoration project that helped revitalize a seedy neighborhood, which now boasts a shopping mall with a food court, condominiums, and office buildings as far as the eye can see. The former court buildings—the Bulfinch Building, designed in 1814 by Charles Bulfinch and expanded by Ammi Young in 1848, and the Old Superior Courthouse with its four late-nineteenth-century buildings—were slated to be torn down to provide a parking lot for the new high-rise Middlesex County Courthouse across the street. When a scandal developed "and

**BULFINCH SQUARE
CONDOMINIUMS**
The new construction embraces the ruins of Boston's 1891 Mount Vernon Church, which burned in 1978. The old triple entry doors to the church were replaced by glass to offer the passersby on Beacon Street a vision of the garden that lies beyond the ruin while a bronze angel stands poised on the parapet of the Massachusetts Avenue facade. The church tower contains a poetic apartment: seven stories, each thirteen-by-thirteen-feet square.

people started getting indicted," the demolition was abandoned, but it took Gund and his development partner, Peter Madsen, five years to put together a development package that ultimately involved city, county, state, and federal funding. By this time the buildings had been standing vacant for twelve years.

By linking the new courthouse to the impressively columned 1896 Registry of Deeds, Bulfinch Square not only makes sense of the whole government complex, but its lively historical forms, including a clock tower and colonnade, also manage to distract attention from, and hence diminish, the looming cliff of the new courthouse. To bring this liveliness to light, Gund demolished the twentieth-century additions that obscured the original facades and re-created the colonnade with Temple-of-the-Winds columns. Restoring the interior was particularly challenging because a sign had invited people to take what they wanted from the due-for-demolition building. "When you're doing a project like this," Gund explains, "people ask, 'Where did you find the craftspersons?'" Actually they were all in the area, most of them in their twenties and early thirties, a fact that Gund finds encouraging. "There's a lot of interest among young people in getting in touch with themselves and their history by learning a craft." The clock in the tower was, however, saved by an older man who "showed up at the construction site with a black bag." He had a full-time job, but took parts of the Victorian-era workings home over the course of a year, repairing the clock for a mere \$5,000.

Gund managed to save six of the buildings' seven major spaces, one of which is now used as a theater by the Cambridge Multicultural Arts Center. Another, part of Gund's office, was reputedly the courtroom where the Boston Strangler was arraigned; a delightful plaque on the wall above the former location of the judge's bench shows the hand of God holding the scales of Justice. This detail, like the eleven different colors of the stenciling, the columns, and the clock, show "the tremendous civic pride" that went into this "statement of justice. I think we're slowly getting back to buildings as an expression of civic pride," Gund muses.

One interesting preservation conundrum emerged in the restoration of Bulfinch Square; faced with creating a new exterior wall, Gund wanted to simply duplicate an

adjacent one. The National Park Service, however, wanted modern design to distinguish new from old construction and thus satisfy the requirements of the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards*; Gund did the best he could but feels it was a mistake. He points out that Ammi Young did not put "distinguishing" wings on Bulfinch's original building, and 150 years later, we think of it as all one structure, to no historical detriment. Gund's creative approach to this problem is typical. He prizes old buildings—and their remnants—as design elements that enrich the environmental context by showing the layering of time. He is not a purist.

"Most of the world is not interested in strict preservation," says Gund. When he was a student at Harvard and working on Old City Hall, he thought that "it was odd that people didn't value buildings for the quality of their architecture. People were willing to save buildings that were involved in events like the Revolution or that had a tie to the individual, like the Longfellow House. But to save a building because it was interesting architecture, people didn't really do that." Instead they saved "star buildings and ignored the rest. Now we're moving in a different direction, and preservation has become a much stronger force. We have less of a star system. And we're treating the city as if it's a living organism: Here is a building, and it has one use now, and in the future it'll have some other use."

Perhaps the most stunning example of this philosophy in Gund's work is the 1983 Church Court Condominiums at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Beacon Street, built around the ruins of the 1891 Mount Vernon Church. Only two facades and the tower of the Roxbury puddingstone structure—never a star building—survived a devastating 1978 fire. Of the three developers who bid on the site, one wanted to put up a gas station, another proposed to "reroof the church, put in a new floor, and make it into New England's largest singles' bar." Gund offered to turn it into a forty-three-unit condominium. "At the time people said you could never put housing in this part of the Back Bay," Gund remembers. But, as with School-House Condominiums and Bulfinch Square, the project helped the neighborhood turn around. Now, L-shaped new construc-



SCHOOLHOUSE CONDOMINIUMS
The neoclassical 1891 Charles C. Perkins Elementary School on St. Botolph Street in Boston now houses twenty-one apartments.
(Each of the ten original classrooms has become a single residence.) Its most original feature is the imaginary garden in its two-story entrance lobby, a sculpture of brilliantly colored shapes that suggest, among other natural objects, a tree, clouds, waves, and fruit; the railing of the stairs is a chrome "vine."

tion incorporates the old rectory on Beacon Street, then angles behind a garden, framed on two sides by the ruins, to emerge in a large curve overlooking the Charles River.

The new construction is heavily patterned in shades of brown, red, and buff brick and dark and light granite, with window frames in brown or chartreuse. These patterns accentuate the bays and serve to divide the building into base, middle, and top; but they also relate the structure to the other buildings on the street—fancifully patterned, elaborately decorated Victorians in a variety of styles. Church Court at once stands out from and fits in with its neighborhood. But it does so without ostentatious postmodern references. It is what it

looks like: a condominium layered onto the remnants of a church.

The entrance lobby features a stairway that looks like a pulpit and trusses that recall the original ecclesiastical interiors. A bronze angel by sculptor Gene Cauthen stands on a parapet above Massachusetts Avenue. But the whole complex is so cheerful that it is hard to dredge up romantic associations with—or reflective ironies about—living in the ruins of the church. Rather than indulge in symbolism Gund seems to have concentrated on what kinds of spaces people would like to live in, especially their views of the world outside. One condominium has the rose window in the master bedroom: the tower contains a thirteen-by-thirteen-foot, seven-story apartment that enjoys a face-to-face encounter with the angel; the condominiums in the

*"There's something very nice about restoring a building.
It's a way of making life whole."*

L-shaped new construction feature views of the Charles River, except for the lower floors, which look out into the garden.

Similarly, at the Lincoln School, a public elementary school currently under construction in Brookline, an old house that will serve as a music center has had its stable moved and converted to the lunchroom of the new school. While unlikely to spark historical associations in the memories of the young noon-time diners, the arched windows, the height of the ceiling, and the very shape of the stable convey a sense of an older, more pleasant era: The room in no way resembles a typical elementary-school cafeteria.

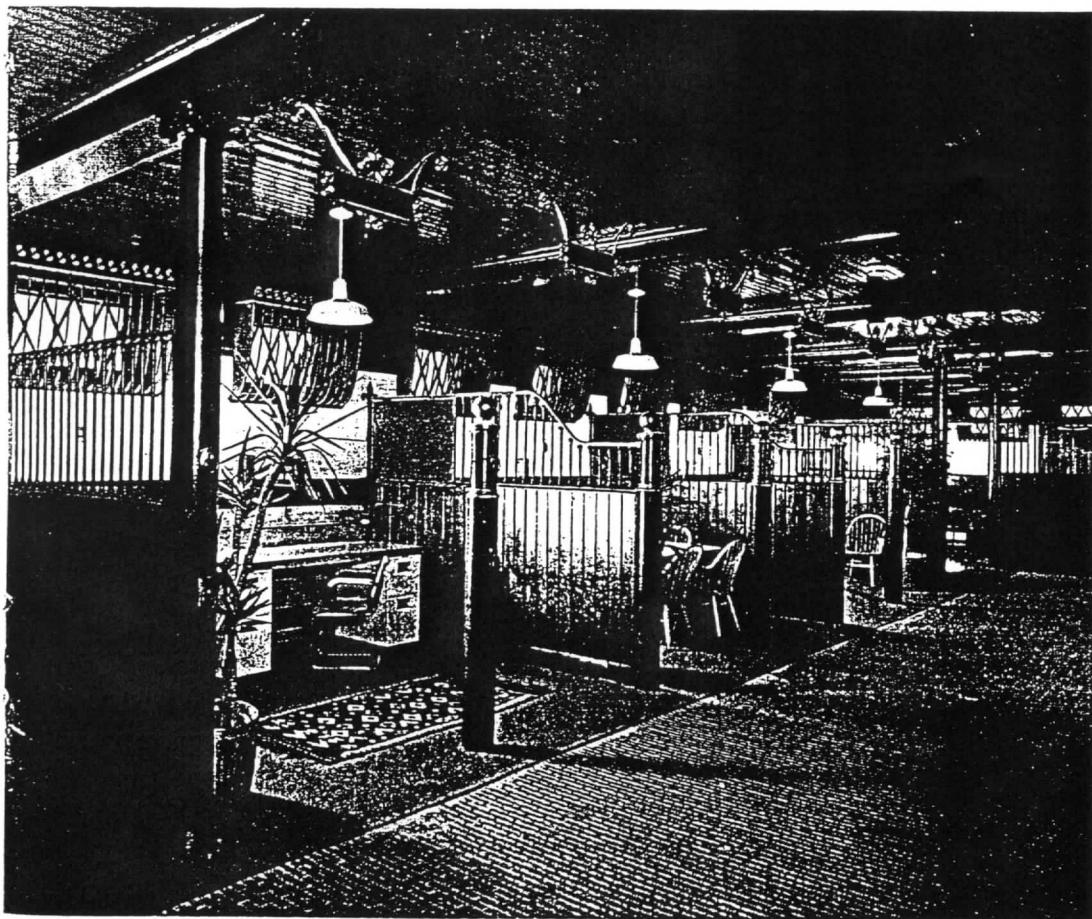
In a slightly different spirit Gund exploited cultural associations in additions to two historic libraries. In doubling the size of the 1883 Lincoln Library in suburban Lincoln, Gund's 1989 addition, which houses the children's library and reading room, incorporated wooden turrets, a face (two square windows above a horseshoe window), and a stepped parapet embellished with frisbeelike disks. In joining the 1905 Mount Holyoke College Williston Library to a 1901 classroom building, Gund created a building, including a copper-clad bridge, that recalls the

Collegiate Gothic of the earlier structures; he also turned a dark interior core of offices and stacks into a skylit Renaissance-style court.

As befits a major collector, Gund encourages the use of art in and on his buildings. For example, a large bronze eagle stands in the courtyard of Bulfinch Square; removed from the Old Post Office when it was torn down in 1929, the sculpture found its way to the front lawn of a politician's summer house in New Hampshire. And there is Cauthen's angel ("Cauthen insisted that it had to be five foot two; he said that angels were five foot two; and it was only at the dedication that I met his wife . . ."). Instead of trees in pots, fiberglass models of German garden statues of two of the four seasons grace the enclosed courtyard of the Inn at Harvard (1991). The Lincoln Library sports a terra-cotta plaque depicting a Lamp of Knowledge; Gund's 1989 addition features a cast-stone medallion with the back-to-back L's used on the hardware of the old building, the date of construction, and an eagle sitting in the Tree of Knowledge. The town of South Hadley, Massachusetts, used a seal on its stationery, but no one had ever thought about what it looked like in three dimensions until

Gund reproduced it in a large fiberglass format to use in South Hadley Village Commons, an eleven-building town Gund designed in 1991 to provide an urban context for the Mount Holyoke College campus. Like the buildings themselves, the works of art knit together the community as they link the past, the present—and the future: for South Hadley Village Commons Gund created a fountain ringed in time-honored fashion by a quotation, in this instance a favorite saying of the college president's: "Finer than Frog's Hair." Such a work looks 100 years hence when students will harken back to the past to decipher its meaning.

Historic forms provide the basis of many of Gund's new buildings. "When you look at Harvard buildings at the beginning of the century," says Gund,



*"People are looking for some sense of community.
That's what a lot of preservation is about."*

"clearly there was a kind of rationale—the idea that these buildings were going to teach people about a sense of reason, a sense of proportion. There was that objective. Architects designed buildings to inspire students with noble educational ideals." And to do this, they in many instances relied on the forms of the past.

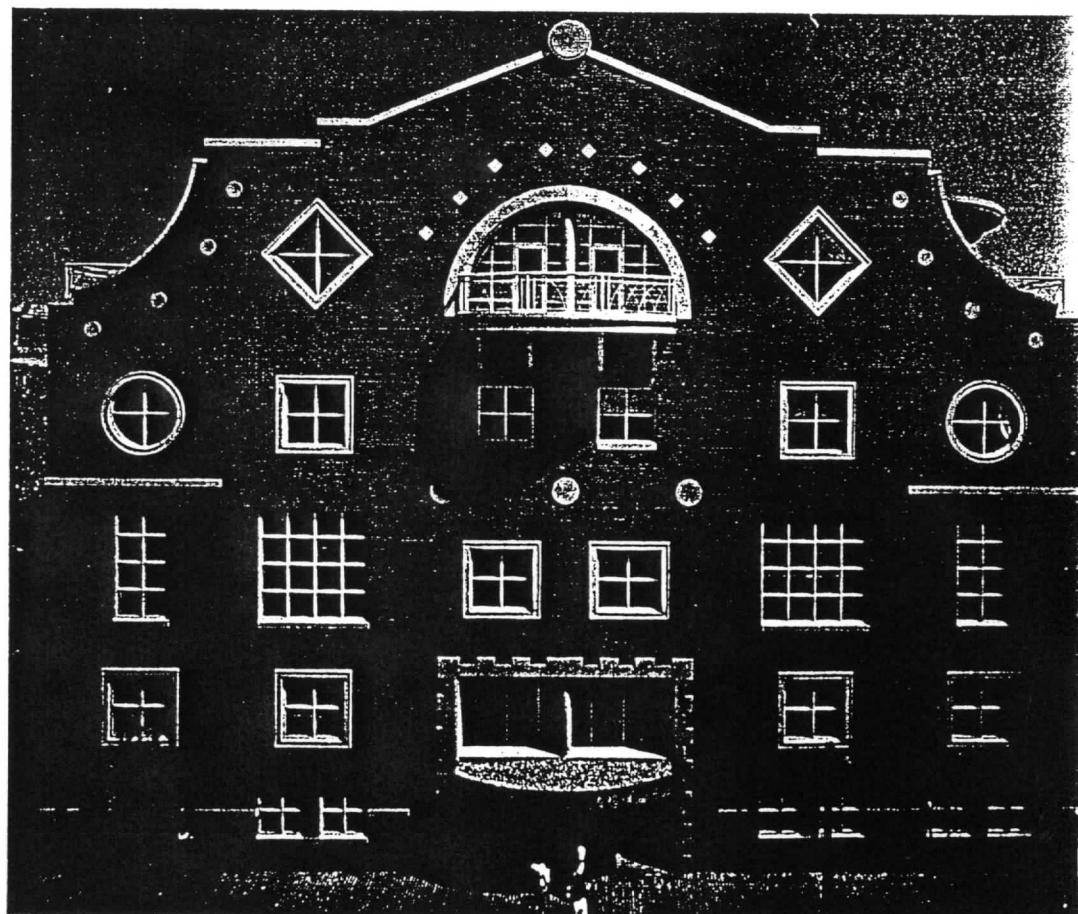
In like spirit, Gund provides broad cultural associations for his new construction, especially those projects that themselves house cultural institutions. The 1992 Fernbank Museum of Natural History in Atlanta recalls "all the great old natural-history museums that were built around the turn of the century in Chicago, New York, and Washington." Similarly, the Lincoln School in Brookline brings to mind the private schools, built in the nineteenth century, that dot the New England countryside. The courtyard of the 1991 Inn at Harvard resembles the Harvard houses. And the 1987 visitors' center for Plimoth Plantation, in Plymouth, Massachusetts, looks like an English barn—a timeless one, for the museum wanted no specific references to history. As for noninstitutional construction, the 1989 Golden Eagle Lodge in Waterville Valley, New Hampshire, resembles the rambling resorts of the past, while Gund's own summer house, under construction in Nantucket, exploits the shingle style, as does a wonderful 1983 house on Fisher's Island that looks as if one of those enormous cottages had dissolved into the earth, leaving only its roof behind.

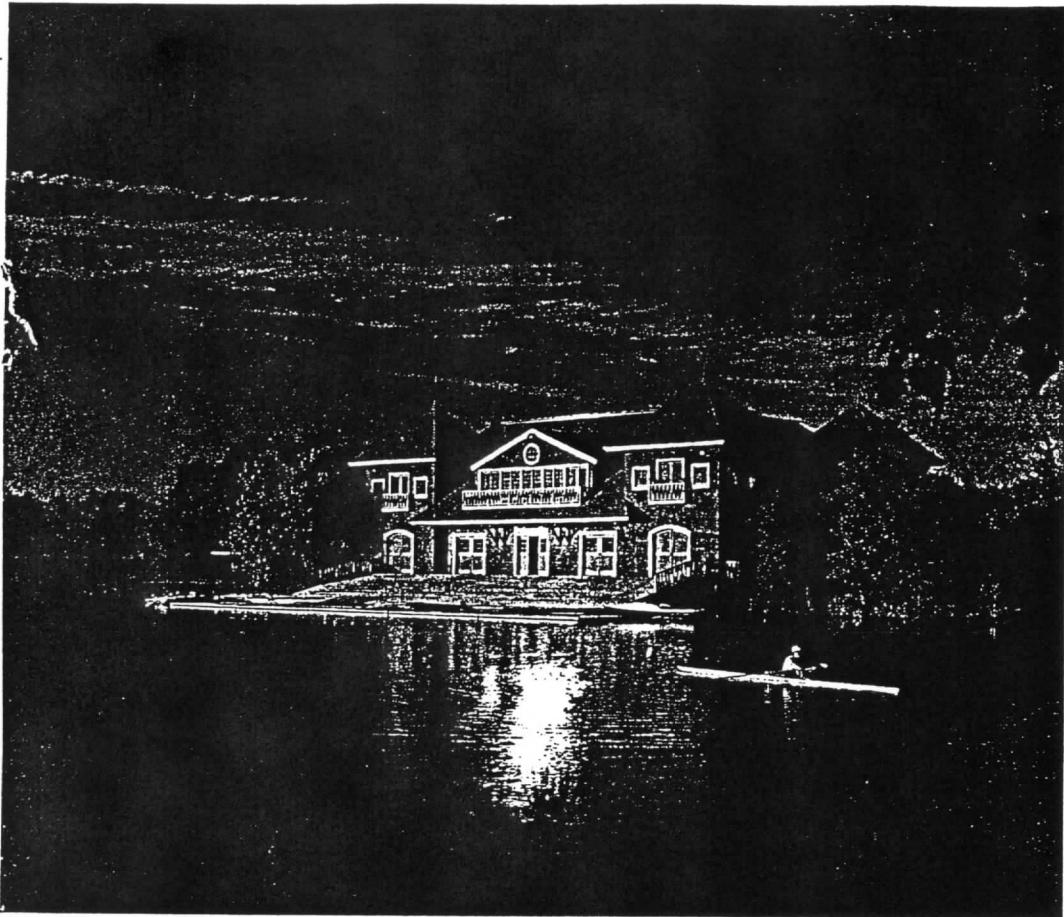
These projects are not literal copies; they are not even precise quotations; rather, they capture and convey the historic spirit of a type. In this vein the boathouse Gund designed in 1989 for Northeastern University is of particular interest. With its large, low roof (an exercise room occupies the top floor) and symmetrical four-towered plan, the structure recalls other nineteenth-century university boathouses along the Charles River; indeed, the building won Gund a certificate of commendation from the Victorian Society in America "to honor a significant contribution to the pre-

servation of Victorian ideals in design and architecture."

Certainly a fair number of Gund's buildings are thoroughly contemporary. And he seems particularly pleased when, like One Faneuil Hall Square (built as a combined retail/office building in 1988 and now taken over to good effect by The Limited), they are set in the context of historic architecture, "a reaction against the purist idea that you can't put a new building next to a historic building." But, old or new, context is all, and ultimately Gund is concerned with how people experience the organic city. For example, his thirty-one-story skyscraper at 75 State Street (1989) mediates between taller and shorter buildings in the vicinity. Its gilt patterning is related to its historic neighbors, and the floor levels are clearly marked, in reaction to some of the "alienating, totally anonymous" vitreous slabs nearby. Says Gund, "I think it's very important to see where someone is in a building so that you can have a reading of the city as you walk around in it." The tower of 75 State Street is pushed back so that the front part of the building is the same height as the historic buildings, "five or six stories. Anything larger than that you can't really relate to" up close. But from half a mile away the marked floors

ESOTERIC BALLET
The Boston Ballet needed a building that in addition to serving functional purposes would establish the company as a valid institution in the Boston cultural community. This 1991 building offers presence and pizzazz as well as practice spaces for students and the professional company and offices, all integrated by a broad stairway that functions like a Main Street.





in 75 State create a visual yardstick by which the pedestrian can measure relationships among other buildings.

How you come upon a building in the urban context is particularly important to Gund. He laments the unimpeded views and isolated surroundings of a number of Boston's star buildings. For example, a direct view of King's Chapel used to be blocked by a building; when it was replaced by new construction the view was unblocked: "It totally destroyed the space," explains Gund. "You can see the building, but you can't enjoy the building. You can see it from a distance, and then you get closer. Surprise and drama are lost." Similarly, creating vast, barren spaces around the Government Center exposed and diminished Faneuil Hall. "You used to come through narrow winding streets, and you came to Faneuil Hall, and it was as big as the world. It was very impressive," says Gund. "Now they've cleared the buildings around it to the point that it looks like a toy."

Practicing what he preaches, Gund has maintained circuitous routes in South Hadley Village Commons. When Mount Holyoke administrators interviewed applicants who had been accepted but then decided not to come, they discovered that "the issue wasn't single-sex education, the issue was that there was no there there," recalls Gund. He was hired to build a whole town—not a reproduction, but one with the sense of a New England village that would offer shoe-repair shops, hairdressers, psychiatrists, bars, video rentals, and living space above the

Wavy dormer shingles and oar-shaped balusters lend witty punctuation to a traditional structure that houses facilities equally divided between the sexes. A new structure on the Charles River, the 1989 boathouse nevertheless looks to the past for its inspiration.

so give the building a sense of transparency. Here, too, a Gund project has been instrumental in helping a neighborhood turn around, but the very lyricism of the building assures that it is visually unrelated to the other buildings on the street.

Its relationship, rather, is to the people. "I was interested in getting a sense of immediacy for the neighborhood. I wanted you to be able to walk down the street and hear music and see people dance," explains Gund. And, in fact, on pleasant evenings when the company performs in the grand studio on the third floor with its large windows, the residents of the houses facing the Boston Ballet get out the barbecue grills, pull their lawn chairs out onto their roofs, and invite their friends over for the evening. This may not be exactly what architecture critics call contextualism, but such uses make the city seem synonymous with civilization, and fitting into it an extremely good idea. "I think people are looking for some sense of community," says Gund. "That's what a lot of preservation is about. It's an identity." ▼

stores. "All the experts said you had to block off the entrances and treat it like a mall to control people." But in South Hadley Village Commons, "you can move around to discover all the shops, and it's turned out very well because people love the idea of exploring."

In the end it may be Gund's awareness of the way people have enjoyed urban life for thousands of years that makes him a model preservationist. If you happen to be wandering around Boston's South End, you may run across one of Gund's totally new buildings that does not on first glance seem to fit into anything much—certainly not its architectural context. A highly decorated box, its top front corners cut off to create a baroque profile, the 1991 home of the Boston Ballet boasts a lobby that mimics a theater; the lower floors house the school while the upper floors serve the professional company; at the top a grand studio for the

company provides practice space that is the same size as the stage at the Wang Center where the company gives most of its public performances. A pleasant space that provides views of neighboring houses through its oversized windows, the grand studio is also the site of some of the company's smaller performances. The floors are linked by a grand staircase that serves as a meeting place for everyone in the building, and the whole interior is drenched in light from a liberal number of large windows in a variety of shapes. These al-