The View from the Mayor's Windows
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

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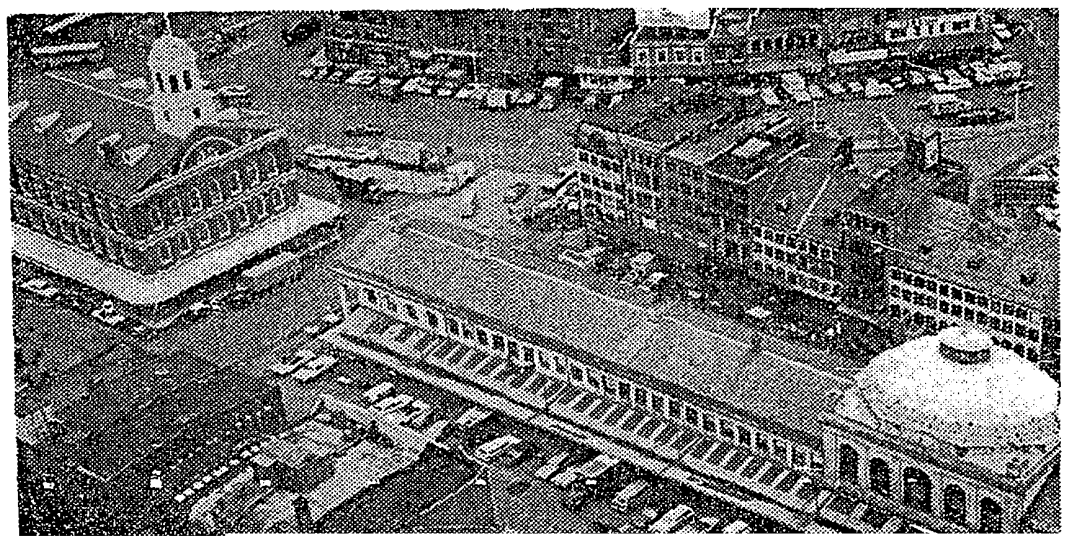

Jim Hughes, Staff Photographer, The Christian Science Monitor

Boston's historic Faneuil Hall and markets
A proper Bostonian alternative to destruction

NOW that Boston has demonstrated how to produce a fine new building in its spectacular City Hall, it has turned around to show what can be done with some fine old buildings. It has turned around quite literally, since the old buildings are at the new City Hall's back door.

Historic Faneuil Hall, enlarged by Charles Bulfinch in 1805, stands directly behind City Hall, its delicate scale and Georgian propriety acknowledged and framed by the massive modernity of the new structure. Just beyond Faneuil Hall are the 1824-26 Greek Revival meat and produce market buildings known properly as the Faneuil Hall Market and popularly as the Quincy Market, after Mayor Josiah Quincy (later president of Harvard), who built them. The superb, but shabby old gray granite market complex and the waterfront beyond — now cut off from the city by the Chinese wall of an expressway that was one of the country's first major highway mistakes — are the view from the Mayor's windows.

The expressway will be widened shortly, forcing out the pushcart food market, an offshoot of the larger market that has clung to the highway's edge. The meat and produce markets themselves are being moved and by later this year will be 70 per cent empty. The new banks and skyscrapers sparked by the Government Center construction, of which City Hall is a part, are closing in, pushing history.

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But the point to be made here is that the story will not have the usual unhappy ending. These buildings and this history will not be subjected to the predictable development formula which rips out the roots of a city's identity for a faceless downtown. Pride and past will not be sacrificed for a clutch of characterless construction that is a profitable form of urban blight. The Faneuil Hall market area will be rehabilitated and restored to vital contemporary uses in an exemplary preservation program.

This program will not, we repeat, will not create a museum. Its whole point is to keep these handsome and historic structures that provide the city's continuity and variety, reintegrating them into the community by what are called "adaptive uses" to serve changing needs and conditions.

That, incidentally, is the whole point of historic preservation. Every mayor and renewal director in every American city, large or small, should be exposed to what is being done in Boston.

By 1966, when the Government Center was well along, it became clear that the path of redevelopment being generated by the new construction, left to itself, would bulldoze through the old market. A $50,000 study was commissioned by Edward Logue as one of his last acts as head of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, to determine conditions and possibilities in the section bounded by Chatham, Clinton and Commercial Streets and Merchants Row. The study was carried out by two nonprofit consultant groups, Architectural Heritage, and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Thirty thousand dollars came from the BRA and $20,000 was raised by Architectural Heritage.

Now, with a $2-million dollar grant just received from the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development — made possible by a 1966 liberalization of the law to include historic preservation in urban renewal — the project is going ahead. The market buildings, which were found "remarkably sound" by professional engineering analysis, will be restored and converted to new commercial functions. There will be shops and restaurants on the basement and ground floor levels and office space on the four floors above.

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Since the temple-like main market building and its two flanking blocks of matching construction on North and South Market Streets are 535-feet long, they will offer 30,000 square feet of space on a single floor, which is competitive with new construction. So is the figure of $15 to $22 a square foot cost for conversion by commercial developers.

Central heating, cooling and utilities will be provided by a tunnel system to be built by the city out of its $2-million grant, which will also pay for basic exterior restoration. Total costs are estimated at about $10-million. The appraisal of retail value on a net rental income basis and capitalization at commercial rates is approximately $8-million, with the HUD grant for preparatory work closing the $2 million gap.

The market has always been city-owned and the BRA has bought the flanking blocks. The city will retain ownership, eliminating the land-cost factor to the developer. The preparation of interior commercial space will be done by private builders on long-term leases.

The pushcart market will be relocated within the project as one of its features. Emphasis is being placed on intensive and attractive pedestrian and tourist uses, with local amenities and services as a focus not only for the Government Center, but also for the expanding financial district and the new waterfront residential renewal. The work is to proceed in accordance with the exhaustive five-volume study prepared by the consultants.

What is operating here is a good deal more than nostalgia for the past. It is Yankee shrewdness in the service of the most desirable urban objectives. The buildings being saved are part of a total urban design of the early 19th century for the market's structures and streets by Alexander Parris, one of the country's leading early architects. It represents one of the most distinguished groupings of a highpoint in American architecture, the Greek Revival.

Parris's classical market building has 22-foot, 15-ton monolithic granite columns from the same quarries as the Bunker Hill monument. These columns, and the huge slabs used for the flanking blocks, employ the stone not as a facing material, but as structural elements. the buildings' "concentrated richness, broad simplicity and feeling for large scale" is the essence of the Greek Revival as defined by Talbot Hamlin.

The complex was also Boston's first urban renewal project. Built in 1824-26 on landfill facing the harbor, it involved all of the tools of urban renewal: city purchase of property, the use of eminent domain, land writedown for private investors carrying out a predetermined city scheme, and design review. It was stipulated in the deeds that developers must follow Parris's designs for the unified blocks opposite the market building. (Ah, the hue and cry in Lincoln Square, where New York developers are now being asked to do the same thing!)

For those who cherish their Boston landmarks — yes, the Durgin Park restaurant will remain. Its fresh fish has become as much a part of the Boston heritage as the Old North Church. Right now, you can still go to the Quincy Market Cafe, where the market workmen eat. Equally fresh fish is let down through a hole in the ceiling above the plastic counter practically under the classical dome of the main market building; the cooks are below the historic beams above the customers' heads. If you are still around the Government Center at four, you can go back for some of the apple pie just baked for the next day's early-breakfasting wholesale food dealers. The obliging countermen may even let you have a pie to take back to the plane.

The food stalls will be closing then, but earlier in the day you will have walked the length of the 145-year old building, past choice cuts of meat and jewel-heaps of tomatoes. It will have been a sentimental journey. But it will not have been marred by the threat of destruction. Boston has found a way to keep the past and the present in one of the happiest architectural, historical and urban triumphs of any modern city.