ARCHITECTURAL VIEW: WHY YOU ALWAYS WIN AND LOSE IN URBAN RENEWAL
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ARCHITECTURAL VIEW

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Why You Always Win and Lose In Urban Renewal

Twenty years is a short time to see a dream of a renewed city realized; it is also a period richly instructive in the compromises necessary to make that dream come true. The gift arrives, and the package is full of surprises. The results are tinged with glory and frustration.

Twenty years ago I wandered Boston's downtown streets and fell in love with Quincy Market. It was in an obvious state of terminal decline and only a few historians and antiquarians were concerned about its survival. The urban renewal bulldozer was poised at its edge. Its 6.5 acres of seedy beauty, order and distinction were the subject of massive inattention.

Built to designs by Alexander Parris for Mayor Josiah Quincy in 1824-26, the group of market buildings near the waterfront—correctly called the Faneuil Hall Markets for their illustrious neighbor and predecessor—was not only the country's first large redevelopment project; it was also arguably its finest Greek Revival complex—then and now. A temple-like granite structure 535 feet long by 50 feet wide, with east and west porches of monolithic Doric columns and a central copper dome, is flanked by two long, harmonious 5-story granite blocks across wide streets. In the 1950's such treasures were being ritually sacked. But Quincy Market miraculously escaped that fate: on August 26, exactly 150 years to the day after it originally opened, it reopened triumphantly. The restoration is one of the stellar features of Boston's exemplary downtown renewal, a remarkably sensitive synthesis of new and old, from Faneuil to City Hall. I walk those streets now with particular pleasure. There is no impossible dream.

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Then why did I spend my first hour in the restored market awash in nostalgia for old produce stalls, old wooden beams, old narrow stairs, chaotic pushcarts and the kind of honest shabbiness that is the antithesis of chic? Why did I respond with sympathy to the gentleman who asked with considerable anguish, "Where the hell are the vegetables?"

But the vegetables are there, and so are the flowers and the meat and the oysters and clams, as well as canvas bags and candles and crepes and ethnic food bars; they are there in the only context—elite, cleaned-up, skillfully merchandised settings—that will work economically, for expensively remodeled space, with appeal for the affluent and sophisticated public that can support such an enterprise today. You cannot ever really turn back the clock, or have things as they were. The appropriate resolution of the hard realities of necessary change are what preservation is all about.

And yet every "appropriate" solution kills the old buildings a little bit at the same time that it keeps them alive—a practical and philosophical paradox. And every "appropriate" solution must be accepted if urban beauty, amenity and history are to be retained at all. Here there is obvious tenant quality control, and an explosion of too-clever graphics. The dilemma, in the end, is balance. You win and you lose at the same time, and with luck, you mostly win. Quincy Market is a winner; the Saturday generation will probably take it over. After that first sad hour, I had a wonderful time.

Keeping such a superb urban complex and great architectural monument as a productive, functioning part of the city is fraught with promise and perils. No matter what I write of the anguish and politics, of the controversies and decisions, what credits are given, someone will correct the record. But one decision stands out clearly: in the mid-1960's, Edward Logue, then head of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, with the help of Walter Muir Whitehill and other historians, determined that the market complex was not expendable—one of his many bold, risky stands that paid off in Boston's brilliant downtown renewal.

Logue commissioned a $50,000 study which was carried out by a preservation-oriented development group, Architectural Heritage, Inc., under Roger Webb, the successful restorer-developer of the Old City Hall, and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. The Cambridge architectural firm of Benjamin Thompson Associates was also proposing redevelopment. But from an office on the dusty, deserted top floor of the Quincy Market building, Mr. Webb produced an impressive five-volume feasibility study that earned a $2 million HUD preservation grant in 1969.

In 1970 the Boston Redevelopment Authority, under its new director, Robert T. Kenney, advertised for developers. Architectural Heritage lost out to Benjamin Thompson and Van Arkle-Moss as architects and developers. When Van Arkle-Moss could not meet the schedule and dropped out, a murky political donnybrook ensued, with Webb back in competition until Thompson produced the Rouse Company, developers of Columbia, Md., and many shopping centers. Rouse's commercial expertise, staff and capital, combined with Thompson's detailed architectural plans, carried the day in 1973. The developer has leased the building for 99 years from the city of Boston, with a guaranteed return to the city.

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While these negotiations were proceeding, the B.R.A. "restored" the exteriors of the buildings according to a plan by architect-preservationist Theodore Stahl, which required the demolition of all additions and changes that had modified the original design. This embroiled the project in public and professional controversy about the amount of reconstruction involved. Some units are totally rebuilt. The new-old shells were then turned over to the Thompson-Rouse team.

It was agony all the way. First, the developer had to be innovative, since no conventional marketing or real estate precedents applied. There was the question of concept—with the decision made to keep the structures as open and related to the street and each other as possible. The buildings have been stripped, in many places, to a remarkable "skeleton" of granite—Parris used huge granite slabs and lintels unconventionally as support members for bearing walls, like structural timber or steel—and the granite-framed ground floor windows were left open. This gives the main market building interior continuity with the glass-canopy-covered "bull market," a kind of elegant pushcart market outside. There is no air-conditioning, but shutters and doors close these areas in cold weather, when they are heated. Mechanical equipment is exposed. A three-level, three-aisle, all year shopping center has been created as a colorful service anchor for the developing downtown community.

The second battle was over many-paned versus modern plate glass windows, with historians ranged obstinately against architects. The patently sensible but still debatable solution was the pivoting single pane window that is being used. A third fight revolved around street paving and trees. There is now a negotiated mix of granite blocks, brick, and cobblestones, shaded by black locusts, and the streets are closed to cars.

Another controversy surrounded the architects' desire to cut through the market building's upper floor to reveal the elliptical dome and create a focal central rotunda. It was done, and has proved a wise decision, although the "new" detailing could be less assertive. The superb Greek Revival detail of the dome helps re-establish the building's architectural character and the focus is both handsome and functional. Every decision has had to be a touchy compromise between historicism and rational reuse, tempered by practical economics.

Financing, conditioned by 10 years of local skepticism and a depressed real estate market, was balky and slow. Interestingly, the major part of it has come from New York. But the pieces are all in place now, the North and South Market buildings will open in 1977 and 1978 to complete the commercial complex, and the next generation will wonder what the struggle was all about. Today Quincy Market is a showpiece in a city of rich urban and esthetic rewards.

Garth Huxtable

Boston's Quincy Market: "You cannot ever really turn back the clock."