



Published by the Boston Society of Architects
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July/August 2006, Vol. 9 No. 4, "1976"

"From the Editor"

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Spirit of '76

Why 1976? Why look at one year, let alone this year in particular? The quick answer is that it's as good a benchmark as any. Benchmarks are all around us — in annual job reviews, reports from mutual-fund companies, even in the form of the pencilled lines on the kitchen door frame that measure how much the kids have grown. Benchmarks are regularly applied to cities, too — usually as economic or demographic statistics. But it's rare to step back and assess broader changes in a city — changes in culture, values, personality, spirit.

The year 1976 actually has much to recommend it as a benchmark for Boston. The year of the Bicentennial, the Tall Ships parade, the opening of Quincy Market, the completion of the Hancock tower, and the first First Night, 1976 was a turning point in the city's history, a time when the city embraced the concept of “public realm” (though the term was not much used then) and took the first steps toward becoming the world-class city it is today. After years of urban-renewal demolition, after grand plans such as Government Center, after countless meetings and speeches about “the New Boston,” Bostonians could at last see the first manifestations of promises of a healthier, more vibrant city. And it excited them.

With crowds that could be measured in hundreds of thousands — people who were returning to the city for the sheer pleasure of public spectacles in an urban environment — events during that Bicentennial year suggested a new role for the modern city beyond commerce and industry. The view of the city as a place of leisure and entertainment has fueled the city's rebirth as much as the strength of its medical and educational institutions or the vigor of its financial and service industries. The suburbanites who had fled the city came back to visit and, more recently, to stay.

Yet the mid-'70s were hardly halcyon years; the word “crisis” was frequently in the headlines. The busing crisis seized the city, sending seismic waves of fear, violence, and distrust across the city, with implications for racial and educational issues that can be felt today. The economy was dismal, as the nation struggled to meet the challenges of the energy crisis and as Boston still contended with the inertia of decades of disinvestment.

Thirty years later, issues that came of age during that era continue to have a profound effect on what we build and how — even if we have not yet fully resolved them. The energy crisis that sent architects scrambling to continuing-education workshops to

learn about insulation and thermal breaks begat an energy code and, eventually, the sustainability movement.

The mid-'70s also spawned today's smart-growth movement, with initiatives such as the Office of State Planning, formed by Governor Michael Dukakis during his first term (1975-1979). Its emphasis on public transit, preserving the character of cities and towns, conserving undeveloped land in suburbia and exurbia, and targeting new development toward existing community centers was exemplified by a policy to build new state facilities such as registries on downtown sites.

But the *look* of the city was most profoundly changed by the preservation movement that came into its own in the mid-'70s, accompanied by a new wave of sometimes-unlikely citizen activists (one subset was known as the LOLITS — little old ladies in tennis shoes). Citizen participation is a fact of development life these days. But it's sometimes hard not to think that in codifying acceptable treatment of historic structures, we have also ossified

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our own response to them. Ben Thompson's glass garage doors on Quincy Market and Graham Gund's multi-level restructuring of a fire station for the Institute of Contemporary Art suggested a far greater ease with historic structures and a far richer understanding of the nature of urbanity. The architects and preservationists of 30 years ago deliberately married preservation and energy concerns, a symbiosis that is today largely forgotten with every tear-down that is replaced with another SUH — sport-utility house.

In 1976, Orwell's 1984 still loomed in a scary view of the future, as did the 2001 of Kubrick's space odyssey. 2006 seemed unimaginably far away, surely enough time to solve the major problems of the day. Some of that work remains unfinished, some happily resolved. The future is never as far away as you think.

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Editor