

IVORY POWERS

DYNAMIC URBAN CAMPUSES PROMOTE THE COMMON GOOD





by Ann Beha FAIA

Our city is shared space. Our urban blender mixes universities, hospitals, neighborhoods, schools, and businesses in cocktails laced with challenges and opportunities. And at the center is the role that academia is playing in defining Boston.

Our “City of Eds” is properly named, with more than 30 higher education institutions in Boston proper. The Boston Redevelopment Authority counts more than 152,000 enrolled students, up from 130,000 in 1990, with more than 68,000 jobs generated by colleges and universities, and with students and their visitors apparently spending \$1.7 billion annually within the city footprint. The academic community is a Boston lure, synonym, and powerhouse. Yet we make it a tough city for them.

More than 600 acres of our city is occupied by educational institutions—but that’s only 2.8 percent of city land. Concentrated throughout neighborhoods, historic districts, downtown, and the waterfront, campuses are power properties. Their facilities, development, and economic impact make them networks, not just places. Competition for real estate acquisition and development opportunity—from the University of Massachusetts, Boston, to Wentworth, Northeastern, and Emerson, plus possibilities for future development at campuses like Simmons, Wheelock, and Harvard in Allston—make urban campuses complex and controversial.

Our campuses have evolved. Once-gated enclaves are porous. Commuter colleges and trade schools are now colleges and universities; real estate has been acquired, flipped, and retraded. At their best, these dynamic institutions have given back urban revitalization, public programs, cafes, retail, 24/7 action, youth presence, athletics, and green space. If we want continued growth and strength in Boston, robust urban solutions, an accessible and greened city, and the activation of historic buildings, the city’s colleges and campuses are our allies. We need to make their voices, visions, and contributions even more effective.

Does Boston’s academia have its own distinguishing trait? Seepage is one. The overlap of campus in neighborhood and urban settings is alternatively seen as an invasion or a salvation. We can experience the merge—city as campus/campus as city—in two provocative institutions: Emerson College and Northeastern University.

Emerson, the largest institutional owner in Downtown Crossing, founded in 1880 as the Boston Conservatory of Elocution, Oratory, and Dramatic Arts, has always been part of our fabric. It originally occupied



buildings on Pemberton Square, Bromfield Street, and in the South End's Odd Fellows Hall; Back Bay became its primary home in the mid-20th century. Owning a slew of tired mansions and apartment buildings, from Zero Marlborough Street to 303 Berkeley Street (now luxury residences), Emerson explored relocation in the 1980s, first considering the Pine Manor College campus in Chestnut Hill, then staking its future on Lawrence, Massachusetts, a huge opportunity for that aging industrial city. Plans fizzled with rising construction costs and legal challenges. As Emerson addressed the risks and loss of the "Boston factor," it began to sell its buildings, acquiring run-down properties near the dwindling Combat Zone.

Today this "campus on the Common" is connective, open, vital. Close to 5,000 students and faculty occupy a 10-block radius of largely repurposed historic structures. Emerson brought city theaters back—the 569-seat Paramount, the Emerson Majestic, hopefully the Colonial. Students and programs have vitalized the Little Building, the Walker Building, and the Tuft Performance and Production Center on quaint Boylston Place. The college has knitted itself into the urban fabric and brought back a threatened city precinct.

Interestingly, Emerson has never constructed a large "signature" building. No "gateway" announces its campus portal. Instead, new facilities are tucked into the streetscape, small lots, and alleys. Counterintuitively, its presence is without architectural assertion; instead, it is stitched into the city's fabric. (Recently, adaptive-use plans for the Colonial Theatre have had detractors, but the college is taking a fresh look to preserve more of the historic interior.) Emerson has been a downtown change agent, bolstered by new eateries, retail, successful and new housing, pushing on the edges and traditions of border neighborhoods, creating pressures and extraordinary possibilities. Student life has stabilized and energized tough, dark blocks. Other neighborhood advocacy groups have emerged, and the area is now a Business Improvement District. At Emerson, city and campus are one.

Northeastern University was founded on Huntington Avenue in 1898 as "The Evening Institute for Younger Men," in the

YMCA. Its 1980s enrollment stood at 60,000, supporting commuters and part-timers, many housed in the Fenway. Boxy gray brick structures and parking lots were signature features. Tightened to 20,000 students, today's Northeastern revolves around well-scaled green space, pedestrian walkways, and transport hubs. Its footprint extends to Roxbury, the South End, and downtown. On the Avenue of the Arts, new midrise construction, pedestrianized streets, and landscape has transformed the drive-through building assemblage into a welcoming, accessible, transparent, textured, and still-evolving precinct.

That ball got rolling in 1992 with a singular design gesture and change agent: A simple student services building, the Marino Center, designed by HNTB Architecture. Its double-height glass curtainwall showcases the exercise facility, active day and night. Huntington Avenue, known for solidity in its 20th-century structures, suddenly sported a giant, active, human screen. Later, appealing enclaves of housing replaced off-campus apartments, with William Rawn Associates, Architects' West Village introducing new scale and texture, and Kyu Sung Woo Architects' deft academic structures bound by open green space.

Northeastern is a builder: In 2013, it unveiled plans for a science and engineering complex on Columbus Avenue, bringing more life to this important transit corridor and precinct. In 2014, the university helped secure a \$20 million federal grant for infrastructure improvements at the MBTA Ruggles Station, and recently it renewed and expanded the city's run-down Carter Playground and Field, investing more than \$25 million as its sole supporter. This broad-based planning and construction program elevated a full university program to its current level of academic leadership and urban presence. Northeastern's *US News & World Report* rankings went from 162 in 1996 to 47 in 2015.

More signs of academic energy include Mass College of Arts' eye-capturing residence, the reach of Berklee College of Music on Massachusetts Avenue including Rawn's glass tower, new buildings at the New England Conservatory of Music (in which our firm is involved), and the Boston Conservatory. These institutions offer public programs, street energy, evening life, youth, investment, and a defining urban presence.

Crushed projects, however, include a notable duo: Suffolk University and Fisher College, each proposing dorms in residential neighborhoods, hit the wall. Suffolk relocated



its dorm; “Stop Fisher,” a local website, lobs accusations and antipathy toward its neighbor’s plans.

Academic institutions can’t stand still. Their core mission is intellectual exploration, and their future is staked on agility. They are created to promote new thinking and push boundaries and expectations. Staid is their enemy. It only makes sense that their facilities should reflect their vision.

In this, we are not their ally. City and state review and approval processes need to change. We demand filings; reviews; neighborhood engagement; PILOTS, or payments in lieu of taxes; concessions; citizen meetings; advocacy group encounters; BRA and Civic Design Commission presentations; reviews by Landmarks, Zoning, Traffic, Public Works, Historic, and Conservation Commissions; and so on. These processes are excessive, costly, tiered, and complex. We need to take another look and break down silos of individual interests. Mandated institutional masterplans require large teams of consultants: wind, shadow, environmental, and zoning specialists; attorneys; design and engineering teams; traffic engineers; preservation specialists and a new breed known as “The Process Manager.” The excuse is that it is all part of “The cost of doing business in Boston.” Excessive processes try patience and the pocketbook, and they shut down good ideas by default.

Idea: A shared, pedestrianized street—greener, safer, more welcoming—requires multiple agencies’ review, extensive studies, lengthy processes. Idea: A change in traffic patterns? State and city reviews for months. Idea: New green space? Extensive environmental process and community oversight, brokering, and revising.

Opinions and agencies, repeat presentation performances, and pontification about whether a proposal is “Boston enough” get into the bloodstream of a project and weaken its resolve. Controls have their impact; I see new ideas precalculated as too risky, with too many hurdles and too much chance for opposition quickly set aside by their proponents with the assumption that a turndown might follow months of costly advocacy.

If H.H. Richardson offered a vision for Trinity Church today, I would bet he couldn’t get it approved. Too many disparate materials, too many window styles, highly overdecorated, no retail at the ground level, dense and intense in its design, too derivative of Richardson’s world travel, not a “fit,” too big, overblown, assertive. Just not “Boston.” An adverse impact on open space. But Trinity is a defining Boston building—it is part of our city’s DNA.

This is our process. Does it make projects better, or do ideas die an early death, for fear of the process? How do we know what we are missing, and what do we want? Self-examination is overdue.

Let’s openly explore the 21st-century role and impact of Boston’s institutional properties. Support open inquiry and challenge assumptions. Imposed obligations, “gimmies,” and “tax” contributions need to be equitably and openly resolved. Let’s encourage, not discourage, impact. Projects that spur retail, new housing, day- and nighttime activities, safer streets, and greener open space, and that sustain mixed use are good for all of us. I’d take more height if it meant more green and sunlight for pedestrians. Support shared streets and widened sidewalks—they offer greater pedestrian pleasure, bike paths, safety, benches, trees, and public art. And at the core, let’s revisit and consolidate the review process. Set common goals for reviews. Eliminate silos of authority that toss projects and owners from agency to agency. Prohibit agencies from acting unilaterally, without input from citizens or their own appointed commissions. Diversify participation, with more millennials involved, bringing new viewpoints and youth to commissions and oversight groups. Clarify neighborhood roles, encouraging citywide vision, not just abutter attacks, on institutional plans. Encourage concessions that benefit all citizens, not just the noisiest.

Essentially, make creative planning and permitting an accessible and affordable process, earmarked by innovation, efficiency, and creativity and the common good. It’s a renewal of our core character—a shared city, but with a huge dollop of sensibility about where our strength really lies and a resistance to a bloated gamesmanship that dilutes action and new thinking.

Let’s ask ourselves how this “innovation hub” opens itself to the very institutions that fuel it. In the face of robust institutional strength, we have an unprecedented opportunity to envision, plan, and support the city we want; otherwise, it’s just the city we will get, in a world we worry about. ■



PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT TO RIGHT

Marino Center at Northeastern University, by HNTB, is a student services building that’s active day and night. Photo: Richard Mandelkorn

A multiuse residence hall at Berklee College of Music, by William Rawn Associates, Architects. Photo: Robert Benson Photography

Emerson’s mixed-use Paramount Center, by Elkus Manfredi Architects, is a residential, academic, and performance venue. Photo: Peter Vanderwarker

The Boston Conservatory’s Ipswich Studios, by Handel Architects and Utile, features performance, rehearsal, dance, and student service areas. Photo: Chuck Choi

THIS SPREAD, LEFT TO RIGHT

The Boston Conservatory, continued

The Tree House Student Residence of the Massachusetts College of Art, by ADD Inc, now Stantec, sits on a tight urban site. Photo: Chuck Choi

The Little Building at Emerson College, originally by Clarence Blackhall, is being renovated by Elkus Manfredi Architects. Photo: Rick Friedman

The mixed-use International Village at Northeastern University, by Kyu Sung Woo Architects. Photo: Timothy Hursley